January 5, 2011

New endowed chair at Yale unites teaching of theology and the environment

Yale Daily Bulletin

A pledge of $3 million will endow a joint senior faculty appointment between Yale Divinity School/Berkeley Divinity School and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (FES) in honor of H. Boone Porter, a graduate of Yale College, Berkeley and FES, and his wife, Violet M. Porter.

The endowment substantially enhances the interdisciplinary study of theology and the environment that has been developing at Yale for many years, culminating in the establishment of a joint degree program in 1997. The gift comes from the children of the Porters through the Porter Foundation. Boone Porter, who died in 1999, was a scholar, priest, writer, and environmentalist, and both he and his wife played an important role in the Episcopal Church.

Yale Divinity School Dean Harold Attridge said, “This gift from the Porter Foundation will ensure that the collaboration that has developed in recent years between Yale Divinity School and the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies will continue and expand into an even more fruitful partnership. The environmental challenges that we face involve not only scientific and technical issues, but also issues of fundamental values and moral commitments.”

Peter Crane, Dean of the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, said, “We are delighted and humbled by the commitment of the Porter family and truly excited by the new opportunity to further develop the already-strong connections between religion and environmental stewardship at Yale.”

“For Berkeley, this gift is not only an important contribution to addressing the urgent ecological issues of our day,” observed Berkeley Dean Joseph Britton. “It also places the seminary in the forefront of theological education in the Episcopal Church, vividly demonstrating the larger horizon in a university divinity school.”

A leader in the burgeoning field of religion and ecology, Yale created the first joint Master’s degree program in both disciplines in the nation. In recent years, several faculty members with a focus on religion and the environment have come to the University, and a number of major conferences at Yale have explored environmentalism from an ethical and theological viewpoint. An issue of the Divinity School publication Reflections was entirely devoted to the subject and included contributions by the likes of Wendell Berry, Wangari Maathai and Bill McKibben. Many Divinity School alumni are actively engaged in the environmental movement, professionally and in their private lives.
Porter Foundation President and Berkeley Trustee Nicholas T. Porter ('86, M.Div. '94) said, “As a graduate of Yale College, Berkeley Divinity School, and Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, my father knew that his work and life was deeply shaped, informed and enriched by these great institutions. As a memorial to both him and my mother, we are delighted to be able to similarly enrich the lives and studies of future students of Berkeley and Yale.”

Porter’s teaching career began at an Episcopal seminary near Milwaukee and culminated with his appointment as the first tenured professor of liturgy at The General Theological Seminary in New York. Later in his career he was editor of the weekly magazine The Living Church, a publication focused on the Anglican tradition. He also had a major role in the development of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. He graduated from Yale College in 1945, then earned degrees from Berkeley in 1950 and the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in 1996. In 1997 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Berkeley.

In addition to the endowment for a Porter professorship, the Porter family also donated Boone Porter’s papers to Yale, working especially through H. Boone Porter III ‘72. The papers, documenting Porter’s lifelong commitment to the church and environment, have been deposited in the Yale Divinity School Library.

Yale Divinity School and Berkeley Divinity School, a seminary of the Episcopal Church, began their affiliation in 1971. Berkeley maintains an independent board of trustees and dean, but both schools are located on the Yale campus at Sterling Divinity Quadrangle. Berkeley students receive Yale degrees, along with a diploma or certificate in Anglican Studies from Berkeley.

http://dailybulletin.yale.edu/article.aspx?id=8129

Also see this story from Yale Divinity School – Notes from the Quad:

$3 million gift pledged in support of endowed chair in religion and environmental stewardship

http://www.yale.edu/divinity/notes/101201/gift.shtml

January 5, 2011

Noah’s Ark replica shows conservative Christians are embracing green building

By Philip Kennicott
Washington Post

When the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky., opened on Memorial Day 2007, temperatures inside the 100,000-square-foot complex began to spike. Huge crowds of warm bodies will do that to an HVAC system, and it took months of tweaking through the museum's first hot summer to get the system working properly.
Mike Zovath, senior vice president of Answers in Genesis, the organization that built the Creation Museum, says he has learned his lesson. As a consortium that includes his group prepares to break ground this spring on a biblical theme park called Ark Encounter, which will include a replication of Noah's Ark built according to the dimensions given in the Book of Genesis, it is turning to the latest trends in "green" architecture. Scheduled to open in 2014, Ark Encounter will include environmentally sustainable technology "from Day One," Zovath said, and will be built by a firm that specializes in LEED-certified construction and design, the industry standard for environmentally efficient buildings.

That means geothermal heating, rainwater capture, active and passive solar heating and specialized window glazing. Even the 500-foot-long ark, which its owners say will be the largest timber-framed structure in America, will use sustainable heating and cooling, and lighting designed to reduce energy expenditure.

One might say that stories about green architecture have now officially jumped the ark. For a decade, at least, new office buildings, hotels, and even shopping centers have been trumpeted with news of their LEED ratings, which range from merely "certified" through silver, gold and the much-coveted platinum. Churches, synagogues and other places of worship have competed for environmental status through the LEED process. But it is a mark of success of the LEED standards, promulgated by the U.S. Green Building Council, that there is a new comfort level with them among conservative religious groups, including biblical literalists.

The Ark Encounter has been in the news recently because of its strict interpretation of the Noah story, a biblical passage that has taken on new resonance as global warming raises fears of larger and more devastating floods and droughts worldwide. Bloggers have pounced on pages from the Answers in Genesis Web site that patiently explain why dinosaurs will be included among the animals represented in its ark display: "God sent two of every (seven of some) land animal into the Ark," it says. "There were no exceptions." They also believe in unicorns.

But the appearance of the LEED standards on the organization's Web site is the bigger news, suggesting not only the extent of a trend already well documented - the embrace of environmentalism among evangelical Christians - but a fundamental shift in how religiously conservative Christians think of two basic biblical ideas: dominion and stewardship. And that change could have profound implications for the ongoing debate about global warming. Progress in battling the rise of global temperatures might depend less on consensus about environmental science and more on broad theological agreement about humanity's relation to the cosmos.

Roger Platt, senior vice president of global policy and law at the Green Building Council, says the success of the LEED standards among conservative groups has a lot of to do with the fact that they are voluntary and cost-effective. His group not only created the standards and advocates for "progressive building codes" but also lobbies for "climate change legislation, including carrots and sticks." He says there isn't a LEED system for boats, and that includes arks. But his group "is ambidextrous enough" to encourage green building, whether or not the builder believes in climate science, he says.

Zovath is a climate change skeptic. "Personally, I don't buy into it," he says. But he likes the bottom line of energy efficiency.
"There is a pretty significant return on investment," he says. But it's not just about financial return. It also has to do with how he defines stewardship, the responsibility for the Earth that Christians believe was given by God in several key verses of Genesis, especially 1:28.

"We are to be in dominion over everything that He created," Zovath says. "Not to waste it, not try to destroy it."

Over the years, and millennia, the meaning of those two words - stewardship and dominion - has changed how Christians relate to the natural world. Fundamental differences in the creation story, and the personalities of the different authors of Genesis, have created a tension between dominion understood as a hierarchical, possessive, even violent mastery of the world, and stewardship as a form of service, to God and the Earth, in God's name. Perhaps only in the past half-century has the more caring, nurturing notion of stewardship taken hold, as man's power over nature has shifted from minimal (in the days of agrarian and herding societies) to near-absolute (atom bombs, deep-water off-shore drilling, plastic grocery bags). Nature today is threatened, not threatening. And younger evangelicals are also shifting away from older patriarchal ideas.

"The Book of Common Prayer in the 1950s spoke of 'this fragile Earth, our island home,' but nobody really knew what that meant," says Sally Bingham, founder and director of Interfaith Power and Light, a group that works to make connections between ecology and faith. Now the fragility of the Earth is taken seriously not just by relatively left-leaning denominations, such as the Episcopalians (Bingham is also canon for the environment of the Episcopal Diocese of California) but by more traditional Christian groups. Today, one has to look hard, to the practitioners of inflammatory rhetoric, to find echoes of the old "dominion" thinking, such as this nugget from conservative commentator Ann Coulter in 2001: "We have dominion over the plants, the animals. . . . God said: 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours!' "

But there is still substantial discomfort among conservative Christians with the rhetoric of environmentalism.

"They don't want to use the word 'environment,' " Bingham says. "But they, too, have creation care."

Zovath says that the reluctance among conservative Christian groups to use the semantics of environmentalism shouldn't hold them back from embracing a broader idea of stewardship.

"There has been a sense over the years that stewardship has been kind of hijacked by the ultra environmentalists who want to worship the creation, not the creator," he says.

The word stewardship, once associated primarily with church committees in charge of fundraising, now includes a broader, more holistic sense of responsibility.

Michael Crosbie, editor of Faith & Form, an interfaith magazine devoted to religious art and architecture, says many congregations are integrating the nuts and bolts of how "to be good stewards in the micro sense" of maintaining buildings and balancing budgets with a broader "sense that there is a religious reason for doing it."
He also believes that green building may be far more extensive than anything that can be measured by applications for LEED certification, which can be an expensive and time-consuming process. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.)

"A lot of congregations are trying to be green but not going that extra step," he says.

That includes Zovath. He says Ark Encounter won't apply for LEED certification, even though it will use LEED techniques and include information and displays about them for public education.

Just saying you're going to build green, like advertising food as "all natural" or "heart healthy," can be an empty gesture. And the LEED standards are no panacea. They don't, for example, distinguish between buildings we need and theme parks we don't.

But even the discussion of green architecture at an attraction devoted to the inerrant word of the Old Testament is a fascinating cultural moment. Biblical literalism offends many people not just because it requires believing the implausible but also because it is seen as an impediment to large-scale consensus on science, including the science of global warming.

The existence of a green Noah's Ark in Kentucky suggests a strange possibility for evolution on the subject. It might be easier, and quicker, to gain consensus on how to combat global warming than it is to convince the last, but still powerful, holdouts against the manifest scientific truth of climate studies. Given that the Green Building Council estimates that 39 percent of carbon dioxide emissions each year come from buildings - more than transportation and industry - widespread changes in architecture could affect the environment even without agreement on the science behind it. Fear of soiling God's garden may be more powerful than fears of an epic new flood.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/05/AR2011010505477.html

January 5, 2011

Hindus back Beatle Paul McCartney’s call to India for a National Vegetarian Day

ANI

Sir Paul McCartney is reportedly urging India to declare a National Vegetarian Day and Hindus have thrown their weight behind his call to celebrate meat-free living and compassion toward animals.

Well known Hindu statesman Rajan Zed, in a statement in Nevada (USA) today, said that vegetarianism, besides reducing greenhouse gas emissions, was good for ethical and health reasons also.
McCartney reportedly sent a letter to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh saying such a day could save animals while helping to protect both the environment and people's health and "it would be a celebration of life."

Zed, who is president of Universal Society of Hinduism, pointed out that Hinduism promoted strict vegetarianism insisting on ahimsa (not harming living creatures) and non-killing, and renouncing animal slaughter and meat eating. It suggested taking of sattvik (vegetables, fruits, etc.) and avoiding rajasik (eggs, etc.) and tamasik (meat, intoxicants, etc.) foods.

Rajan Zed argued that there was extensive protection of life in Hinduism and ahimsa was a command. All the major religions of the world were opposed to killing, he added.

Zed further said that as eating less meat would help the environment; more celebrities should come out in support of staying away from meat, thus contributing to a healthier world.

To reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the world's livestock, which was one of the most critical contributors to global warming, McCartney is also advocating Meat Free Monday. McCartney, who has been a vegetarian for over 30 years, finds vegetarianism "very simple, tasty, and most enjoyable".

According to reports, meat is responsible for 18 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions, more than transport's 13 per cent.

According to an estimate, around 42 percent of India's about 1.2 billion people are vegetarian.


January 11, 2011

Ecological wisdom of the ages

By Pan Yue
chinadialogue

Longstanding Chinese ideals, which seek balance between man and nature, could help humans find a better way of living, writes Pan Yue, China’s vice minister for environmental protection.

Traditional Chinese thought not only calls for the unity of man and nature, but provides the tools that allowed China to practice this principle for thousands of years. This is of great significance in the quest to solve today’s financial and ecological crises.

For the past century, China has studied the west and followed the western path of industrialisation. And while three decades of reform and opening up have brought astounding economic achievements, China has also concentrated into those 30 years levels of pollution it took the west a century to create.
China must not continue to follow in the footsteps of developed nations. Instead, it should take time to re-examine western industrial civilisation and its own cultural traditions.

Western industrialism has its own characteristics and patterns. It is profit-driven and anthropocentric, runs on modern capitalism and is embodied in cities built on industry, commerce and finance. It has created great riches, but it has also done everything possible to shift its class, economic and social conflicts overseas.

However, industrial nations have found that they can export any kind of crisis except for one – the environmental crisis. Hurricanes hit both south-east Asia and New Orleans and rising sea levels will inundate both the small island nations of the Pacific and New York.

Faced with the inherent failings of western industrial civilisation, politicians and academics worldwide have started to re-examine the ecological wisdom of world cultures and ancient religions in search of solutions. In recent years, westerners with the necessary breadth of vision have turned to the east, and specifically to China.

China is unique and its most extraordinary characteristic is that, for thousands of years, it has maintained a nation state united by roots, language and ethnicity. This was possible only because of the deep ecological wisdom contained within the country’s cultural ideals. This wisdom permeates China’s ethics and institutions, is practiced in its way of life and perpetuated by its historical traditions.

The three schools at the heart of traditional Chinese culture are Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Under their combined influences, the Chinese nation formed a unique cultural system – based on moderation, harmony and tolerance. This not only translated into ethical principles, but also informed a set of social systems and lifestyles, such as the civil service, the gentry and the education system. It advocated order, balance, tolerance and harmony, and is the root cause of the continuity of the Chinese nation. It is not, of course, without flaws, or it would never have led to revolution.

Some believe that the values of traditional Chinese culture, as a product of an agricultural age that no longer exists, are not applicable to today’s industrialised society. They are mistaken. All major religions stem from agricultural times, but they remain the spiritual pillars of civilisation and nurture the seeds of further progress. The Chinese tradition should not be abandoned. Its time has not yet passed.

The core of Chinese culture is the pursuit of the harmonious unity of man and nature. This value is expressed in actual institutions and lifestyles by the word du [literally “degree” or “limit”] – the concept of restraint, temperance, etiquette, balance and harmony. Du is the art of propriety, the balance of moderation and suitability, the wisdom of standing in society and acquiring knowledge. It represents the wisdom of the Chinese not just in politics, but in life and in human interaction with the environment.

This wisdom exists not just in the writings of the sages, but is strongly rooted in family values and social customs, and this is one of the great things about the Chinese tradition. In traditional society, a single set of principles linked state institutions and policy with the common people and
the privileged; and the classical texts and texts of the sages with the lives of the public and the official class. These doctrines or dao [literally “the way”] apply to anything from the management of a household and making tea to commerce, swordsmanship and even drinking and the underworld.

Dao is spirit, principle and state. It links heavenly law and nature with human ethics and daily life. It seeks not the maximisation of material pleasure, but beauty and creativity, meaning that daily life in an ecological civilisation aspires to more than fame and riches. These may seem like minor things, but together they form the living practices of a healthy society. This steady, measured lifestyle moderates desire and seeks a rich and full spiritual life, capable of correcting the errors of consumerism and nihilism that western industrial civilisation has brought us.

Thousands of years ago, the parallel rise of western and eastern civilisation showed surprising similarities. Several millennia later, the two sides can surprise the world again, by joining forces on the platform of ecological civilisation. Although traditional Chinese culture is a product of an agricultural past, I firmly believe it contains universal values and can undergo a modern transformation. In just one century, China has transformed itself from an agricultural to an industrial civilisation. A further transformation to an ecological civilisation is entirely possible.

Pan Yue is vice minister at China’s Ministry of Environmental Protection.

This article was first published in the overseas edition of the People’s Daily.


January 24, 2011

A Nobel Peace Prize winner finds spiritual values in planting trees

By Gregory M. Lamb
The Christian Science Monitor

Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement, says spiritual values are the key to healing ourselves and our environment.

New York — On a visit to Japan, Wangari Maathai learned the story of the hummingbird and the forest fire. While the other animals run in fear or hang their heads in despair, the hummingbird flies above the fire time and again, releasing a few drops of water from its tiny beak. "Why do you bother?" the other animals shout at the hummingbird. "I'm doing the best that I can," the hummingbird replies.

"It's such a beautiful story," Ms. Maathai says, thinking of the immensity of the world's environmental problems. "There is always something we can do with our little beak like the little hummingbird."
In 2004 Maathai was honored with a Nobel Peace Prize for her work founding the Green Belt Movement, which enlists villagers, and especially women, to improve their local environment.

Since then, she's concluded that people's values are what motivate them. If the values are good ones, good actions will follow. Hence it's importance for people to tap their spiritual traditions for guidance in caring for the environment, she says.

"I saw that if people have [good] values, they can sustain what they are doing," says Maathai in a recent interview at a New York City hotel not far from the United Nations, where she's addressed the General Assembly in the past.

"If you don't have good values, you'll embrace vices," she says. And if we give in to the vices, "We destroy ourselves. We destroy the environment. If we can embrace [good] values, we also heal ourselves. And in the process we heal the environment."

That's the message of her new book, "Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World."

People learn these values from their parents, their teachers, and their religious leaders, says Maathai, whose own background is Christian.

In the 1970s, her call for African villagers to plant trees may have seemed like a simplistic response to complex environmental problems. But she realized trees hold both symbolic and practical value.

"People use trees for so many things. It was easy to get into a community to talk about trees," Maathai recalls. They provide immediate practical resources: food, firewood, and shelter. They fight soil erosion.

Today, her Billion Tree Campaign has resulted in more than 11 billion trees being planted worldwide.

Her Green Belt Movement embraces four key values: love for the environment, gratitude and respect for Earth's resources, self-empowerment and self-betterment, and the spirit of service and volunteerism.

The Green Belt followers, many of them women, take simple actions in their communities, such as tending tree nurseries, terracing their fields to curb erosion, collecting rainwater, planting home gardens, and building low-tech sand dams.

Maathai attributes her ideas as having come from "the Source" or, in a Christian context, God. But listening for ideas must also be accompanied by "an attitude that allows you to take advantage of that awakening," she writes in "Replenishing the Earth." "This entails keeping your mind, eyes, and ears open, so that when an idea arrives you'll be ready for it."
Maathai is critical of some aspects of Christianity's influence on Africa – especially theologies that suggest suffering is inevitable and that relief will come only in the next world – a view that can lead to resignation and defeatism. "I don't think God puts us here on this planet to suffer or to do nothing so that we suffer," she says.

But she's heartened that many religious traditions, including Christianity, teach that humans should be good stewards of the environment.

"People of faith ought to be in the forefront protecting this creation," says Maathai, who has also written a book on her home continent ("The Challenge for Africa") and a memoir ("Unbowed"). "I'm glad to see that even the pope has come up front to make statements in favor of the environment," she says.

In 1971, Maathai received a PhD in anatomy from the University of Nairobi, becoming the first woman from East or Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree.

She's now back in her homeland of Kenya beginning work on the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies at the University of Nairobi. "They want to call it after me, and I'm very flattered," she says. "They have given me 50 acres of land" on which to build.

Her institute will emphasize "learning by doing," she says, applying knowledge to real problems. "What Africa needs is people who are willing to get their fingers dirty and work with the people."

Planting trees is one way people connect with the natural world, she says. "For unless we see [nature], smell it, or touch it, we tend to forget it, and our souls wither," she writes in "Replenishing the Earth."

She continues to inspire others.

"Wangari Maathai is a unique presence on our planet," says Mary Evelyn Tucker, cofounder of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, in an e-mail. "She exudes love and joy in all she does. Her words and deeds manifest to us that Earth is a sacred community including humans, ecosystems, and all species...."

"She reminds us that there is no lasting peace until we have peace with the Earth itself."


February 1, 2011

Scientists ask Congress to put aside politics, take 'fresh look' at climate data

By Andrew Restuccia
The Hill
More than a dozen scientists took aim at climate skeptics in a letter to members of Congress late last week, calling on lawmakers to put aside politics and focus on the science behind climate change.

In the Jan. 28 letter, 18 scientists from various universities and research centers called on lawmakers to take a "fresh look" at climate change.

"Political philosophy has a legitimate role in policy debates, but not in the underlying climate science," the scientists said in the letter. "There are no Democratic or Republican carbon dioxide molecules; they are all invisible and they all trap heat."

The letter comes as cap-and-trade is all but dead on Capitol Hill and Republicans, bolstered by their new majority in the House, have promised to hold hearings on climate science and the administration's climate policies. Republicans and some Democrats are also hoping to block or delay the Environmental Protection Agency's pending climate regulations.

The scientists took aim at climate skeptics. "Climate change deniers cloak themselves in scientific language, selectively critiquing aspects of mainstream climate science," the scientists said. "Sometimes they present alternative hypotheses as an explanation of a particular point, as if the body of evidence were a house of cards standing or falling on one detail; but the edifice of climate science instead rests on a concrete foundation."

They also urged on Congress to hold hearings on climate science in order to form a better understanding of the latest research.

"Congress should, we believe, hold hearings to understand climate science and what it says about the likely costs and benefits of action and inaction," the scientists wrote. "It should not hold hearings to attempt to intimidate scientists or to substitute ideological judgments for scientific ones."

Here is the full letter:

January 28, 2011

To the Members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate:

The Importance of Science in Addressing Climate Change

As you begin your deliberations in the new 112th Congress, we urge you to take a fresh look at climate change. Climate change is not just an environmental threat but, as we describe below, also poses challenges to the U.S. economy, national security and public health.

Some view climate change as a futuristic abstraction. Others are unsure about the science, or uncertain about the policy responses. We want to assure you that the science is strong and that there is nothing abstract about the risks facing our Nation. Our coastal areas are now facing increasing dangers from rising sea levels and storm surges; the southwest and southeast
increasingly vulnerable to drought; other regions will need to prepare for massive flooding from the extreme storms of the sort being experienced with increasing frequency. These and other consequences of climate change all require that we plan and prepare. Our military recognizes that the consequences of climate change have direct security implications for the country that will only become more acute with time, and it has begun the sort of planning required across the board.

The health of Americans is also at risk. The U.S. Climate Impacts Report, commissioned by the George W. Bush administration, states: “Climate change poses unique challenges to human health. Unlike health threats caused by a particular toxin or disease pathogen, there are many ways that climate change can lead to potentially harmful health effects. There are direct health impacts from heat waves and severe storms, ailments caused or exacerbated by air pollution and airborne allergens, and many climate-sensitive infectious diseases.”

As with the fiscal deficit, the changing climate is the kind of daunting problem that we, as a nation, would like to wish away. However, as with our growing debt, the longer we wait to address climate change, the worse it gets. Heat-trapping carbon dioxide is building up in the atmosphere because burning coal, oil, and natural gas produces far more carbon dioxide than is absorbed by oceans and forests. No scientist disagrees with that. Our carbon debt increases each year, just as our national debt increases each year that spending exceeds revenue. And our carbon debt is even longer-lasting; carbon dioxide molecules can last hundreds of years in the atmosphere.

The Science of Climate Change

It is not our role as scientists to determine how to deal with problems like climate change. That is a policy matter and rightly must be left to our elected leaders in discussion with all Americans. But, as scientists, we have an obligation to evaluate, report, and explain the science behind climate change.

The debate about climate change has become increasingly ideological and partisan. But climate change is not the product of a belief system or ideology. Instead, it is based on scientific fact, and no amount of argument, coercion, or debate among talking heads in the media can alter the physics of climate change.

Political philosophy has a legitimate role in policy debates, but not in the underlying climate science. There are no Democratic or Republican carbon dioxide molecules; they are all invisible and they all trap heat.

The fruits of the scientific process are worthy of your trust. This was perhaps best summed up in recent testimony before Congress by Dr. Peter Gleick, co-founder and director of the Pacific Institute and member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. He testified that the scientific process “is inherently adversarial – scientists build reputations and gain recognition not only for supporting conventional wisdom, but even more so for demonstrating that the scientific consensus is wrong and that there is a better explanation. That’s what Galileo, Pasteur, Darwin, and Einstein did. But no one who argues against the science of climate change has ever provided an alternative scientific theory that adequately satisfies the observable evidence or conforms to
our understanding of physics, chemistry, and climate dynamics.”

National Academy of Sciences

What we know today about human-induced climate change is the result of painstaking research and analysis, some of it going back more than a century. Major international scientific organizations in disciplines ranging from geophysics to geology, atmospheric sciences to biology, and physics to human health – as well as every one of the leading national scientific academies worldwide – have concluded that human activity is changing the climate. This is not a “belief.” Instead, it is an objective evaluation of the scientific evidence.

The U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) was created by Abraham Lincoln and chartered by Congress in 1863 for the express purpose of obtaining objective expert advice on a range of complex scientific and technological issues. Its international reputation for integrity is unparalleled. This spring, at the request of Congress, the NAS issued a series of comprehensive reports on climate change that were unambiguous.

The NAS stated, “Climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities . . . and in many cases is already affecting a broad range of human and natural systems.” This conclusion comes as no surprise to the overwhelming majority of working climate scientists.

Climate Change Deniers

Climate change deniers cloak themselves in scientific language, selectively critiquing aspects of mainstream climate science. Sometimes they present alternative hypotheses as an explanation of a particular point, as if the body of evidence were a house of cards standing or falling on one detail; but the edifice of climate science instead rests on a concrete foundation. As an open letter from 255 NAS members noted in the May 2010 Science magazine, no research results have produced any evidence that challenges the overall scientific understanding of what is happening to our planet’s climate and why.

The assertions of climate deniers therefore should not be given scientific weight equal to the comprehensive, peer-reviewed research presented by the vast majority of climate scientists.

The determination of policy sits with you, the elected representatives of the people. But we urge you, as our elected representatives, to base your policy decisions on sound science, not sound bites. Congress needs to understand that scientists have concluded, based on a systematic review of all of the evidence, that climate change caused by human activities raises serious risks to our national and economic security and our health both here and around the world. It’s time for Congress to move on to the policy debate.

How Can We Move Forward?

Congress should, we believe, hold hearings to understand climate science and what it says about the likely costs and benefits of action and inaction. It should not hold hearings to attempt to intimidate scientists or to substitute ideological judgments for scientific ones. We urge our
elected leaders to work together to focus the nation on what the science is telling us, particularly with respect to impacts now occurring around the country.

Already, there is far more carbon in the air than at any time in human history, with more being generated every day. Climate change is underway and the severity of the risks we face is compounded by delay.

We look to you, our representatives, to address the challenge of climate change, and lead the national response. We and our colleagues are prepared to assist you as you work to develop a rational and practical national policy to address this important issue.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,
John Abraham, University of St. Thomas
Barry Bickmore, Brigham Young University
Gretchen Daily,* Stanford University
G. Brent Dalrymple,* Oregon State University
Andrew Dessler, Texas A&M University
Peter Gleick,* Pacific Institute
John Kutzbach,* University of Wisconsin-Madison
Syukuro Manabe,* Princeton University
Michael Mann, Penn State University   Pamela Matson,* Stanford University
Harold Mooney,* Stanford University
Michael Oppenheimer, Princeton University
Ben Santer, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory
Richard Somerville, Scripps Institution of Oceanography
Kevin Trenberth, National Center for Atmospheric Research
Warren Washington, National Center for Atmospheric Research
Gary Yohe, Wesleyan University
George Woodwell,* The Woods Hole Research Center

*Member of the National Academy of Sciences


February 2, 2011

International Year of Forests (IYF) - "Celebrating Forests for People"

Statement by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director

United Nations Environment Programme
2011 is the International Year of Forests (IYF) and celebrations will officially be launched today during the 9th Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests in New York.

This Year, which comes in the wake of the International Year of Biodiversity, represents an opportunity for evolving our work on sustainable forestry to a higher plain.

Forests are an issue with essential links to livelihoods, addressing climate change and other environmental challenges; the UN's Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development as a whole.

This is in part why forests are a key sector within UNEP's Green Economy work - a landmark report which will be launched at the upcoming Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC/GMEF) - as we work to strengthen all three pillars of sustainable development on the Road to Rio+20 taking place in May next year.

Forests represent many things to many people including spiritual, aesthetic and cultural dimensions that are, in many ways, priceless. But they are also cornerstones of our economies, whose real value has all too often been invisible in national accounts of profit and loss.

This mismatch between reality and perception emerged with full force in The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) work.

It estimates that deforestation and forest degradation are likely costing the global economy between US$2.5 and US$4.5 trillion a year, more than the losses of the recent and ongoing financial crisis.

If one further considers the loss of ecosystem services - from water supplies to soil stabilization and from carbon sequestration to recycling of nutrients for agriculture - then perhaps the imperative to better manage these natural or nature-based assets becomes clearer.

This is given further urgency from the TEEB work which indicates that in some countries close to 90 per cent of the 'GDP of the poor' is linked to nature and forests in particular.

In Kenya, UNEP has been applying TEEB-based analysis to assist the government and donors towards catalysing the restoration and rehabilitation of the Mau forest complex.

These assessments indicate that the Mau may be worth up to US$1.5 billion a year to the Kenyan economy in terms of river flows for hydro, agriculture, tourism sites and drinking water alongside moisture for the tea industry and facilitating carbon sequestration.

Rehabilitating and restoring lost forest ecosystems is now a key pillar of UNEP's work in Haiti as part of the UN's wider strategy to reduce vulnerability, eradicate poverty and deliver a sustainable future for the Haitian people.

UNEP's involvement in forests and forest ecosystems dates back many years and includes some 100 forest projects in the last decade.
But over recent years, this involvement has gained ever broader and deeper traction in part as a result of TEEB, and in part as a contribution to combat climate change.

With the UN Development Programme and the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, UNEP is assisting at least a dozen countries to participate in the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation under the UN-REDD or REDD+ programme.

Accelerating this work to meet the expectations of countries and supporters involved, such as the Government of Norway, will be a cornerstone of UNEP's work in 2011 in advance and beyond the UN climate convention meeting in South Africa.

2011 is a special year both for forests and our sustainable forestry work including a new strategic direction.

The full details of this direction will be launched over the next few months in the run-up to World Environment Day on 5 June where there will be a central focus on the Green Economy and forests.

This will also form part of UNEP's public awareness and outreach work that in turn can contribute to a successful International Year.

In advance of this, UNEP will be launching a new forest-focused coffee table book in collaboration with such famous photographers as Yann Arthus-Bertrand; a special media pack and a new website on forests at www.unep.org/forests

The Sasakawa prize, which will be awarded during the GC/GMEF this month, will also carry a forest theme and I would encourage those that can to join the celebrations.

I would urge all staff and their families and friends-through their work or through their communities-to get involved starting with appending the International Year of Forests logo onto your e-mail signature and by planting a tree at home, at work or at school under initiatives such as the UNEP Billion Tree Campaign whose patrons are Wangari Maathai and Prince Albert of Monaco.


Let us spread the word to the wider world of the importance of these ecosystems to our lives and livelihoods and of course through acting - being part of 'Celebrating Forests for People' - in 2011.
Coal-burning plants defy covenant with Creator

By Bishop Greg Rickel and the Rev. Hunt Priest
The Columbian

The state of Washington is at a crossroads. Last year, the U.S. Senate failed to consider a national climate and energy bill, and there are now congressional attempts to repeal the Clean Air Act and curtail the power of the Environmental Protection Agency to protect our environment and public health. We can hope and pray for positive federal action, but we cannot count on it.

Given the lack of leadership in the “other Washington,” it is now more important than ever for Washington state to step up to the plate and develop real solutions to pollution and climate change. We have the opportunity to do just that by transitioning our state beyond dirty coal by 2015.

The truth is that the carbon emissions, toxic chemicals, and haze generated by the TransAlta coal plant in Centralia have far-reaching effects. Our reliance on fossil fuels hurts our economy locally and the climate globally. Last year, we witnessed the ongoing tragedies of the catastrophe in the Gulf, calamitous floods in Pakistan, and fires across Russia. This year, much of Queensland, Australia is underwater. Because of our burning of coal, the Earth’s weather is increasingly disrupted and produces extremes of heat, drought, storms and floods.

Our own national Episcopal Church speaks of the fragile interdependence of humanity and all of God’s good creation. As regional leaders of this denomination, we understand that the religious community must show prophetic leadership on climate change. Our diocese in Western Washington has joined the national Episcopal Church in the Genesis Covenant, a commitment to reduce the carbon footprints of all church-owned buildings by 50 percent within 10 years. This is a challenging goal and we take it seriously, because truly, no less than the future of humanity is at stake.

In the New Testament, Jesus told his followers to care for the poor and the least of these among us. Coal is a dirty and dangerous fuel source which poisons the air, water, and our own health. We as a country are guilty of using fossil fuels as if there were no consequences. We are not keeping our covenant with the Creator.

Legislation has been introduced in Olympia to cut toxic mercury pollution and reduce carbon emissions by transitioning Washington beyond coal. We call on our state legislators, from both parties and both chambers, to support the Coal-Free Future for Washington bill.

**Strong standards needed**

Haze from the TransAlta plant obscures Mount Rainier and our other wilderness treasures. Mercury from the plant is known to cause neurological disorders in infants and children. Particulates from burning coal have worsened our neighbors’ lung diseases. The TransAlta coal plant is also our state’s biggest contributor to climate change — eliminating the plant’s carbon
emissions would be the yearly equivalent of taking every car off the road in King and Yakima counties combined. We must stop burning dirty coal and make the shift to cleaner, more sustainable fuels.

We must also care for our neighbors as ourselves. In addition to phasing out coal burning at the TransAlta plant, the Coal-Free Future for Washington bill will ensure cleanup of contaminated lands and preparation of the site for future economic development. Further support for the local community includes financial assistance from the Community Economic Revitalization Board and Public Works Board to ensure a fair and planned transition beyond coal.

Nationally, we need strong performance standards under the Clean Air Act for the oldest and dirtiest coal plants, which should not be exempt from health regulations for haze, greenhouse gasses, and mercury. These limits on dirty air should be enforced by a fully funded Environmental Protection Agency. Here in Washington state, we need to transition beyond coal and focus instead on investing in the local economy and a clean energy future. We owe it to ourselves and our children.

Time is short and much is at stake. We are confident that our leaders will be given the grace to make good choices.

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Bishop Greg Rickel is Bishop of the Episcopal Church’s Diocese of Olympia, which encompasses all of Western Washington (www.ecww.org).

The Rev. Hunt Priest is Rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Mercer Island and a board member of Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light (www.earthministry.org).


February 16, 2011

Judge in Ecuador fines Chevron $8.6bn in historic indigenous rights case

By Madeleine Lee and Jay Ruskin
United for Peace of Pierce County

In the latest development in a lawsuit that began against Texaco eighteen years ago and that Chevron has inherited, on Monday a judge in Ecuador fined the oil supermajor $8bn for "widespread contamination of the Amazon basin," the London *Guardian* reported Monday.[1] -- Chevron called the judgment "illegitimate and unenforceable." -- The Journal of Ireland gave a breakdown of the award and emphasized that the suit was motivated by the devastation Texaco inflicted on indigenous peoples of the area.[2] -- A joint press release from Amazon Watch and Rainforest Action Network called the case "historic and unprecedented" and said this was "the first time Indigenous people have sued a multinational corporation in the country where the crime was committed and won."[3] -- The website Planetsave.com described the legal hardball in which Chevron is engaging in an effort to
evade liability.[4] -- For further background, see a 2007 piece by Greg Palast, which already noted: "Chevron has removed all its assets from Ecuador."[5]

Notes:

1. **CHEVRON FINED $8bn OVER AMAZON 'CONTAMINATION'**

   ** Ecuadorian judge finds oil giant responsible for widespread damage to Amazon basin caused by drilling **

   By Dominic Rushe and Rory Carroll
   *Guardian* (London)
   February 14, 2011

   [http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/feb/14/chevron-contaminate-ecuador](http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/feb/14/chevron-contaminate-ecuador)

2. **CHEVRON FINED $8.6bn FOR AMAZON POLLUTION**

   The Journal (Ireland)
   February 15, 2011


3. **STATEMENT ON ECUADOR COURT RULING AGAINST CHEVRON**

   ** Evidence Prevails Over Oil Giant's Intimidation Tactics **

   [*Press release*]
   Amazon Watch, Rainforest Action Network
   February 14, 2011


4. **CHEVRON INSULTS AND ATTACKS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN ECUADOR, COUNTER-SUES**

   By ZacharY Shahan
   February 14, 2011

5. WAR PAINT AND LAWYERS: RAINFOREST INDIANS VERSUS BIG OIL

** Chevron: 'Nobody has proved that crude causes cancer' **

By Greg Palast
November 26, 2007


February 20, 2011

Hindus back Catholic Bishops on Climate Change policy protecting world’s poor

Press Release
Merinews

Hindus have commended the Global Climate Change policy statement of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) which says, “Policies addressing global climate change should enhance rather than diminish the economic situation of people in poverty”.

Hindu statement Rajan Zed, in a statement in Nevada (USA) today, said that world’s poor were most vulnerable to the environmental problems resulting from climate change. Senseless uses of natural resources, extravagance, greed, etc., were some of the major causes of this ecological crisis.

Zed, who is President of Universal Society of Hinduism, argued that affluent countries of the world should do more for environment in view of the global ecological crisis. Richer nations should lead the way and show responsibility by cutting greenhouse gases and atmospheric ozone concentrations and tackling global warming.

Rajan Zed also praised USCCB’s stand: The consequences of climate change will be borne by the world’s most vulnerable people and inaction will only worsen their suffering. Policies should help vulnerable populations here and abroad adapt to climate impacts and actively participate in these efforts. Urgent action that both addresses the growing impact of climate change and acts to protect the poor and vulnerable is needed.

Zed further said that religions should also come forward to do their share of tackling global warming and persuading others on this issue. “We as leaders of various religions of the world should fulfill our obligations by voicing the environmental issues. Religions should not stay silent spectators to threatening ecological crisis faced by humanity”, Zed stressed and urged all world religious leaders, religions and denominations to openly bless environmental causes and develop a global partnership on this subject.
Rajan Zed pointed out that ancient Hindu scriptures, especially *Atharva-Veda*, were highly respectful of mother nature.

Washington DC headquartered USCCB is “an assembly of the hierarchy of the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands who jointly exercise certain pastoral functions on behalf of the Christian faithful of the United States”. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York is the President.


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**February 21, 2011**

How two per cent of global GDP can trigger greener, smarter growth while fighting poverty

New UNEP Report Underlines Sustainable Public Policy and Investment Path on the Road to Rio+20

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi/World - Investing two per cent of global GDP into ten key sectors can kick-start a transition towards a low carbon, resource efficient Green Economy a new report launched today says.

The sum, currently amounting to an average of around $1.3 trillion a year and backed by forward-looking national and international policies, would grow the global economy at around the same rate if not higher than those forecast, under current economic models.

But without rising risks, shocks, scarcities and crises increasingly inherent in the existing, resource-depleting, high carbon 'brown' economy, says the study.

As such, it comprehensively challenges the myth of a trade off between environmental investments and economic growth and instead points to a current "gross misallocation of capital".

The report sees a Green Economy as not only relevant to more developed economies but as a key catalyst for growth and poverty eradication in developing ones too, where in some cases close to 90 per cent of the GDP of the poor is linked to nature or natural capital such as forests and freshwaters.

It cites India, where over 80 per cent of the $8 billion National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which underwrites at least 100 days of paid work for rural households, invests in water conservation, irrigation and land development.

- This has generated three billion working days-worth of employment benefiting close to 60 million households.
Two per cent of the combined GDP of Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam is currently lost as a result of water-borne diseases due to inadequate sanitation.

- Policies that re-direct over a tenth of a per cent of global GDP per year can assist in not only addressing the sanitation challenge but conserve freshwater by reducing water demand by a fifth by 2050 compared to projected trends.

The report has modeled the outcomes of policies that redirect around $1.3 trillion a year into green investments and across ten key sectors - roughly equivalent to two per cent of global GDP. To place this amount in perspective, it is less than one-tenth of the total annual investment in physical capital.

Currently, the world spends between one and two per cent of global GDP on a range of subsidies that often perpetuate unsustainable resources use in areas such as fossil fuels, agriculture, including pesticide subsidies, water and fisheries.

Many of these are contributing to environmental damage and inefficiencies in the global economy, and phasing them down or phasing them out would generate multiple benefits while freeing up resources to finance a Green Economy transition.

**Incomes and Employment**

In addition to higher growth, an overall transition to a Green Economy would realize per capita incomes higher than under current economic models, while reducing the ecological footprint by nearly 50 per cent in 2050, as compared to business as usual.

The Green Economy report acknowledges that in the short-term, job losses in some sectors - fisheries for example - are inevitable if they are to transition towards sustainability.

Investment, in some cases funded from cuts in harmful subsidies, will be required to re-skill and re-train some sections of the global workforce to ensure a fair and socially acceptable transition.

The report makes the case that over time the number of "new and decent jobs created" in sectors - ranging from renewable energies to more sustainable agriculture - will however offset those lost from the former "brown economy".

For example, investing about one and a quarter per cent of global GDP each year in energy efficiency and renewable energies could cut global primary energy demand by nine per cent in 2020 and close to 40 per cent by 2050, it says.

- Employment levels in the energy sector would be one-fifth higher than under a business as usual scenario as renewable energies take close to 30 per cent of the share of primary global energy demand by mid century.
- Savings on capital and fuel costs in power generation would under a Green Economy scenario, be on average $760 billion a year between 2010 and 2050.
The report, *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication*, also highlights enormous opportunities for decoupling waste generation from GDP growth, including in recovery and recycling.

- The Republic of Korea has, through a policy of Extended Producer Responsibility, enforced regulations on products such as batteries and tyres to packaging like glass and paper, triggering a 14 per cent increase in recycling rates and an economic benefit of $1.6 billion.
- Brazil's recycling already generates returns of $2 billion a year, while avoiding 10 million tones of greenhouse gas emissions; a fully recycling economy there would be worth 0.3 per cent of GDP.

The report, compiled by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), in collaboration with economists and experts worldwide, takes meeting and sustaining the UN's Millennium Development Goals - ranging from halving the proportion of people in hunger to halving the proportion without access to safe drinking water - as one aim.

Bringing down emissions of greenhouse gases to the much safer levels of 450 parts per million by 2050 is another overarching target.

The findings were presented today to environment ministers from over 100 countries at the opening of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum.

The report, part of a bigger macro-economic study published online, is aimed at accelerating sustainable development and forms part of UNEP's contribution to the preparation of the Rio+20 conference scheduled in Brazil next year.

The full report is available online from today and countries are encouraged to submit further Green Economy examples. Over the coming months UNEP's Green Economy team plans to present the report in capitals around the world.

Here they also want to learn firsthand how best to assist countries and communities commence a transition to a Green Economy within their national circumstances.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "The world is again on the Road to Rio, but in a world very different to the one of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992."

"Rio 2012 comes against a backdrop of rapidly diminishing natural resources and accelerating environmental change - from the loss of coral reefs and forests to the rising scarcity of productive land; from the urgent need to feed and fuel economies and the likely impacts of unchecked climate change," he added.

"The Green Economy as documented and illustrated in UNEP's report offers a focused and pragmatic assessment of how countries, communities and corporations have begun to make a transition towards a more sustainable pattern of consumption and production. It is rooted in the
sustainability principles agreed at Rio in 1992, while recognizing that the fundamental signals driving our economies must evolve in terms of public policy and market responses," he said.

"We must move beyond the polarities of the past, such as development versus environment, state versus market, and North versus South," said Mr. Steiner.

"With 2.5 billion people living on less than $2 a day and with more than two billion people being added to the global population by 2050, it is clear that we must continue to develop and grow our economies. But this development cannot come at the expense of the very life support systems on land, in the oceans or in our atmosphere that sustain our economies, and thus, the lives of each and everyone of us," he added.

"The Green Economy provides a vital part of the answer of how to keep humanity's ecological footprint within planetary boundaries. It aims to link the environmental imperatives for changing course to economic and social outcomes - in particular economic development, jobs and equity," said Mr. Steiner.

Pavan Sukhdev, on secondment from Deutsche Bank and head of UNEP's Green Economy Initiative, said: "Governments have a central role in changing laws and policies, and in investing public money in public wealth to make the transition possible. By doing so, they can also unleash the trillions of dollars of private capital in favour of a Green Economy."

"Misallocation of capital is at the centre of the world's current dilemmas and there are fast actions that can be taken starting literally today - from phasing down and phasing out the over $600 billion in global fossil fuel subsidies to re-directing the more than $20 billion subsidies perversely rewarding those involved in unsustainable fisheries," he said.

"A Green Economy is not about stifling growth and prosperity, it is about reconnecting with what is real wealth; re-investing in rather than just mining natural capital; and, favouring the many over the few. It is also about a global economy that recognizes the intergenerational responsibility of nations to hand over a healthy, functioning and productive planet to the young people of today and those yet to be born," added Mr. Sukhdev.

Notes to Editors:

Key Findings and Some Key Sectors

UNEP defines a Green Economy as "one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities".

A big part of that transition involves policies and investments that decouple growth from the current intensive consumption of materials and energy use.

While there has been some decoupling over the past 30 years, the gains have been far too modest to put the planet on a sustainable path and conserve finite resources.

Pivotal Policy Role of Governments
Innovative and imaginative public policies will be vital to generate enabling conditions that, in turn, can unleash markets and direct private sector investments into a Green Economic transition.

These include:

- Sound regulatory frameworks, a prioritizing of government spending and procurement in areas that stimulate green economic sectors and limits on spending that deplete natural capital.
- Taxation and smart market mechanisms that shift consumer spending and promote green innovation.
- Public investments in capacity building and training, alongside a strengthening of international governance.

Public policy can also ensure that the benefits of greening one sector can trigger wider sustainability benefits across others.

- Overall, the report suggests that the lion's share of the proposed two per cent of global GDP will need to come from private capital, primed by more modest amounts from the public purse.

**From Fisheries to Buildings - Ten Key Sectors Underpin a Green Economy**

The ten sectors identified in the report as key to greening the global economy are:

agriculture, buildings, energy supply, fisheries, forestry, industry including energy efficiency, tourism, transport, waste management and water.

Of the two per cent of GDP proposed in the report, the sums invested by sector at current levels of GDP would be:

- $108 billion for greening agriculture, including on small-holder farms.
- $134 billion in greening the building sector by improving energy efficiency.
- Over $360 billion in greening energy supply.
- Close to $110 billion for greening fisheries, including reducing the capacity of the world's fleets.
- $15 billion in greening forestry with important knock-on benefits for combating climate change.
- Over $75 billion in greening industry, including manufacturing.
- Close to $135 billion on greening the tourism sector.
- Over $190 billion on greening transport.
- Nearly $110 billion on waste, including recycling.
- A similar amount on the water sector, including addressing sanitation.

**Some Sectoral Highlights**

Agriculture
A Green Economy would invest $100 billion, up to $300 billion a year until 2050, in agriculture in order to feed nine billion people, while promoting better soil fertility management and sustainable water use to improve biological plant management.

- Scenarios indicate an increase in global yields for major crops by 10 per cent over current investment strategies.
- Equal to raising and sustaining nutrition levels to 2,800-3,000 kilocalories available per person by 2030.
- Food waste globally is translating into 2,600 kilocalories per person per day; therefore, a transition to a Green Economy needs to address these challenges, which link to several of the sectors concerned.

**Buildings**

The building sector is the single largest contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, with one-third of global end-energy use taking place in offices and homes.

The construction sector is responsible for more than a third of global material resource consumption, including 12 per cent of all freshwater use.

Based on an IPCC scenario, the climate footprint of the building sector is projected to nearly double to 15.6 billion tones of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2030, or 30 per cent of total energy related CO2.

- A combination of applying existing technologies and growth in renewable energy supply under the Green Economy scenarios could dramatically reduce emissions at a saving equal to $35 per tonne of CO2.
- With the right government policies, energy savings of around one-third could be achieved worldwide in the building sector by 2050 for an annual investment of $300 billion to one trillion dollars.

**Fisheries**

Subsidies estimated at around $27 billion a year have generated excess fishing capacity by a factor of two relative to the ability of fish to reproduce.

The report suggests that investing in strengthened fisheries management, including the establishment of Marine Protected Areas and the decommissioning and reduction of fleet capacity, as well as retraining, can rebuild the planet's fish resources.

- Such an investment backed by policy measures will result in an increase in catches from the current 80 million tones to 90 million tones in 2050, although between now and 2020 there would initially be a fall.

"The present value of benefits from greening the fishing sector is estimated to be three to five times the necessary investment," says the report.
• Jobs losses in the short to medium term can be minimized by focusing cuts in capacity on a small number of large-scale fishers over small-scale artisanal fleets.
• Jobs in fisheries are expected to grow again by 2050 as depleted stocks recover.

Forestry

Forests generate goods and services, which support the economic livelihoods of over one billion people, recycle nutrients vital for agriculture and harbour 80 per cent of land-based species.

Deforestation also currently accounts for close to 20 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

"Reducing deforestation can therefore be a good investment: the climate regulation benefits of halving global deforestation alone have been estimated to exceed costs by a factor of three," says the study.

The report analyzes the contribution that $15 billion a year - or 0.03 per cent of global GDP - can make to greening this sector, including triggering greater investments in Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD).

Such investments can also assist in scaling-up tried and tested market mechanisms, including certified timber and the certification of rainforest products to payment for ecosystems and community-based partnerships.

• Over the period 2011 to 2050, investment of $15 billion annually, or 0.03 per cent of GDP, would raise the value added in the forestry industry by more than 20 per cent, relative to business as usual.
• The report suggests that a transition to a Green Economy could increase forested land - currently close to 4 billion hectares - by over three per cent in 2020, eight per cent by 2030 and over 20 per cent by 2050, relative to business as usual.

Fast tracking such recommendations could make a key contribution to 2011 - designated as the UN's International Year of Forests.

Transport

The environmental and social costs of transport in terms of air pollution, traffic accidents and congestion can currently cost around 10 per cent of a region or country's GDP.

Policies for greening transport range from those that shift journeys to public and non-motorized transport to ones which boost fuel efficiency and cleaner vehicles.

In Europe, the analysis indicates that public transport investments yield regional economic benefits more than twice their cost.

Reducing the sulphur content of transportation fuels in Sub Saharan Africa could save up to nearly $1 billion a year in health and related costs.
Investing 0.34 per cent of global GDP per year up to 2050 in the transport sector can reduce oil usage by as much as 80 per cent below business as usual - increasing employment by six per cent above business as usual, primarily in expanding public transport.

Waste

By 2050, the world is likely to be generating over 13 billion tonnes of municipal and other wastes: currently only 25 per cent of all waste is recovered or recycled.

- An investment of $108 billion a year in greening the waste sector could lead to near full recycling of electronic wastes, up from the current level of 15 per cent.
- Such an investment could also boost the overall waste recycling threefold by 2050 and cut the amounts going to landfill by over 85 per cent versus a business as usual scenario.

Between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of methane-related greenhouse gas emissions could be reduced by 2030 with associated financial savings.

Waste prevention and management also remains a key challenge for manufacturing, where approaches such as remanufacturing and redesign of products and processes can play a part in reducing waste and resource use.

- If the life of all manufactured products was extended by 10 per cent, for example, the volume of resources extracted could be cut by a similar amount.
- The recycling of heat waste through combined heat and power (CHP) installations presents high potential for more efficient energy use. The pulp and paper industry has CHP installations that allow savings of over 30 per cent of primary energy use.

Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication - A Synthesis for Policy Makers, and the full draft chapters, including the modeling and scenarios, will be available after 1pm Nairobi time (or 1000 GMT) on 21 February 2011 at: www.unep.org and www.unep.org/greeneconomy.

The site will also showcase the current compilation of Green Economy case studies from countries and regions around the world.

The 26th session of UNEP's Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum can be found at: http://www.unep.org/gc/gc26

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 or Rio+20 website is at: http://www.uncsd2012.org/

The International Year of Forests 2011 is at: www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011/

For more information, please contact:

Nick Nuttall, UNEP Spokesperson/Head of Media
February 23, 2011

Forest Conservation Groups in Nepal and Guatemala Win 2011 Sasakawa Prize

2011 Sasakawa Prize winners bring Forest Management and Sustainable Development to Rural Communities in Latin America and Asia

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi (Kenya) - Two projects conserving forests and promoting sustainable development in remote rural communities of Latin America and Asia are the laureates of the 2011 UNEP Sasakawa Prize, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) announced today.

The Asociación Forestal Integral San Andrés, Petén (AFISAP) in Guatemala and the Manahari Development Institute in Nepal (MDI-Nepal) are the co-winners of this year's award around the theme "Forests for People, Forests for Green Growth" in support of the 2011 International Year of the Forests.

The theme highlights the central role of forests in the pursuit of a global Green Economy as key economic resources whose real value has all too often been excluded in national accounts of profit and loss. Estimates from The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) indicate that deforestation and forest degradation are likely costing the global economy between US$2.5 and US$4.5 trillion a year, more than the losses of the recent and ongoing financial crisis.

Both co-winners met a majority of the criteria outlined by the theme. Specifically:

- Promoting the conservation and sustainable management of forests;
- Contributing to a meaningful reduction in carbon emissions caused by deforestation and forest degradation;
- Maintaining forest ecosystems to improve resilience to climate change;
- Supporting pro-poor development, especially among forest-dependent communities;
- Conserving biodiversity and helping secure ecosystem services.
AFISAP, which was founded in 1999, is focused on preserving the forests on a 52,000-hectare concession within the Mayan Biosphere Reserve in the San Andres area which plays a critical role in regional conservation. According to an AFISAP study that used remote cameras, the Mayan Reserve has the highest-density of jaguars ever reported in the world (11 jaguars/100 km2).

The organization, which has distinguished itself as one of the most successful community groups in Guatemala, has also introduced projects to extract the lucrative xate, the popular foliage used for floral arrangements worldwide. Xate, which has been used for 40 years and is exported, has brought enormous economic benefits for the rural communities in the area.

Forests also provide homes, security and livelihoods for forest-dependent populations. In 2006, the World Bank estimated that 60 million indigenous people depend directly on forests for their survival. Indeed, forests sustain nearly half of the population in the developing world, providing wood for fuel as well as non-timber products like nuts, rubber and medicines. For many of the poor in rural settings, ecosystems and the biodiversity they contain are their primary assets and source of livelihoods.

MDI-Nepal, a non-governmental organization founded in 2001, has introduced agroforestry to help improve crop productivity and water irrigation systems as well as reduce soil erosion on the forested hills and mountainous areas. Apart from making up most of the country's land mass, the slopes also are home to 18 million of the 24 million total population. These agroforestry measures have significantly improved food security and living standards of the rural communities living on the steep slopes of Nepal. With the involvement of the indigenous community, MDI-Nepal has delivered economic and social benefits to more than 2,000 households by improving the productivity of marginal lands with the planting of various fruit crops.

The UNEP Sasakawa Prize, worth US$200,000, is given out each year to sustainable and replicable grassroots projects around the planet and recognizes the most innovative, groundbreaking and sustainable grassroots environmental initiatives in emerging and developing countries.

The co-winners, who were selected through a two-tier selection process of an Expert Panel and a Jury that includes Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and UN Messenger of Peace Wangari Maathai, will receive US$100,000 each in order to expand and develop their grassroots projects.

Achim Steiner, UNEP Executive Director and UN Under-Secretary-General who is a member of the Jury Panel, said: "This year's Sasakawa Prize winners underline how the green shoots of a Green Economy are emerging across the globe and in rich and poor communities alike. The two winners are acting on the fundamental fact that the sustainable management of forests is key to securing crucial services from water and soil stabilization to the recycling of nutrients essential for agriculture. In doing so they are tackling not only poverty but forging a different development path for themselves, their families and their nations."

"They are also conserving and enhancing natural assets that serve the world-as a result of the role healthy forests have in combating global climate change. I hope our two winners, from separate corners of the globe, can unite others to similar actions. This would be a fitting tribute to our
winners' work; an inspiring legacy for the UN's International Year of Forests and one way of accelerating the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals".

The co-winners will receive the prestigious Prize at an Award Ceremony in Nairobi, Kenya, where UNEP is holding its 26th UNEP Governing Council / Global Ministerial Environment Forum.

Last year's winners were Nuru Design, a company bringing rechargeable lights to villages in Rwanda, Kenya and India; and Trees, Water and People (TWP), an organization that collaborates with local NGOs to distribute fuel-efficient cook stoves to communities in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Haiti.

For more information, please visit the UNEP Sasakawa Prize website: www.unep.org/sasakawa/ or e-mail: sasakawaprize@unep.org

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Notes to Editors:

UNEP Sasakawa Prize

The UNEP Sasakawa Prize is sponsored by the Japan-based Nippon Foundation, an independent, non-profit grant-making organization that supports both Japanese and international philanthropic projects. The UNEP Sasakawa Prize was originally created in 1982 by the late Ryoichi Sasakawa. The Prize was re-launched in its current format in 2005, and is currently chaired by Mr. Sasakawa's son, Yohei Sasakawa.

The four members of the 2011 UNEP Sasakawa Prize jury are UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and UN Messenger of Peace Prof. Wangari Maathai, Nobel chemistry Laureate and 1999 Sasakawa Winner Prof. Mario Molina, and Ms. Wakako Hironaka, former Environment Minister of Japan.

UNEP Sasakawa Prize Trophy

The striking winner's trophy incorporates sustainable design elements such as wood from an old dhow and recycled glass.

International Year of the Forests

Forests are an issue with essential links to livelihoods, addressing climate change and other environmental challenges; the UN's Millennium Development Goals and sustainable
development as a whole. This is in part why forests are a key sector within UNEP's Green Economy work - a landmark report which will be launched at the upcoming Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC/GMEF) - as we work to strengthen all three pillars of sustainable development on the Road to Rio+20 taking place in May next year.

2011 is a special year both for forests and sustainable forestry work. UNEP's involvement in forests and forest ecosystems dates back many years and includes some 100 forest projects in the last decade. For more information see: www.unep.org/forests

The logo can be downloaded at


February 24, 2011

Green Economy and Environment Governance reform backed by world's environment ministers

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - A major sustainable development conference in Brazil next year offers a key opportunity to accelerate and to scale-up a global transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient Green Economy, a meeting of the world's environment ministers has signaled.

Potential challenges, including new kinds of trade barriers, need to be managed. But a Green Economy offers a way of realizing sustainable development in the 21st century by "building economies, enhancing social equity and human well-being, while reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities".

Ministers called on the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to support countries keen to operationalize such a transition and to play a key and 'active' role in putting the challenges, opportunities and strategies towards a Green Economy firmly on the agenda for next year's landmark meeting.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012, or Rio+20, also needs to address how the world can better manage and govern the environment including by evolving and strengthening the institutions responsible.

The ministers responsible for the environment, who have been meeting this week at UNEP headquarters, expressed concern that the overall efforts of the United Nations and nations in
respect to the 'environmental pillar' of sustainable development remained weak, underfunded and fractured.

In their summary of discussions, released today at the close, many delegates said countries needed to move beyond pinpointing shortcomings and to focus on a real reform agenda in the run up to Rio+20.

"The efforts to strengthen international environment governance should be about more than rationalization of fragmentation and seeking efficiencies. Instead it should be about re-envisioning and even dreaming about what it required institutionally for environment and sustainability, and putting this in place," says the summary, whose chair was Rosa Aguilar Rivero, Minister for Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs of Spain and newly elected President of UNEP's Governing Council.

The summary will form a key input of ministers responsible for the environment into the year long preparations for the Rio+20 conference, which is scheduled for early June 2012.

Close to 100 ministers and over 130 countries attended this week's UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum alongside members of civil society, the private sector and scientific bodies.

**Green Economy and International Environment Governance (IEG)**

The two themes - the Green Economy and International Environment Governance (IEG)-reflect the two major themes of the Rio+20 conference which are the Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and the institutional framework for sustainable development.

In support of these discussions, UNEP presented a pivotal new report on how a transition to a Green Economy might be achieved by countries.

The report suggests that with the right public policies, an investment of two per cent of global GDP into ten key sectors can grow the global economy over the coming 40 years, boost employment overall and keep humanity's footprint within ecological boundaries.

The report underlined that a Green Economy transition is as relevant to developing countries as it is to developed countries and that the precise complexion of such a transition needs to reflect the individual circumstances of nations.

Among the final decisions made today, governments also requested UNEP in partnership with other UN agencies, to develop a ten-year 'framework' of programmes aimed at boosting sustainable consumption and production across societies.

The initiative, which also reflects the ideas and aims of the Green Economy, will be further key input towards the success of Rio+20.
Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "The world is again on the Road to Rio, nearly 20 years after the Earth Summit that has defined humanity's response to sustainable development over the intervening years."

"In Nairobi this week, the world's ministers responsible for the environment have underlined their leadership and their determination to make Rio+20 a success by articulating a forward-looking agenda-one that reflects the realities of a new century and the urgency of bringing together the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental," he said.

"This week ministers also engaged on the complex issues of IEG - how do we strengthen the maze of institutional and financial arrangements relating to the environment, globally and nationally in order to effect real, tangible and transformational change that decouples growth from degradation?" said Mr Steiner.

"As a result of this Governing Council, the direction for that reform has been given a greater focus, new momentum and taken on a greater sense of urgency which will inform the discussion, debate and finally the outcome of Rio+20 next year," added Mr. Steiner.

Concluding the meeting and considering her new role as President of UNEP's Governing Council, Rosa Aguilar Rivero, Minister for Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs of Spain said:

"UNEP has been strengthened thanks to the fruitful debate on the two main themes addressed at the ministerial consultations and I intend to foster the active and effective participation of all relevant stakeholders and particularly civil society, NGO's, Trade Unions and Women during my tenure."

**From Widening Action on Climate Change and Improving Air Quality to a New Science Body on Biodiversity**

The Governing Council also adopted some 17 key decisions across UNEP's Programme of Work. These included:

- Assessments of short-lived climate forcers such as black carbon, methane, fluorinated gases and tropospheric or 'low-level' ozone.

While emissions of carbon dioxide remain the central and over-arching challenge, science is indicating that these other so-called non-CO2 pollutants are currently contributing significantly to climate change.

Fast action to phase them down could not only assist in reducing temperature rises over the next half century and reduce melting in the Arctic, but could provide multiple, Green Economy benefits across areas such as agriculture and air quality improvements.

- Governments backed a new interactive, web-based project to keep the world environmental situation under review. UNEP live, its provisional name, promises to be
more dynamic; interactive and able to provide governments and the public with almost real-time data on environmental trends. A pilot phase of the system is set to be completed in 2012.

- Governments requested UNEP, in cooperation with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), to convene the first plenary of the Intergovernmental science-policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

IPBES, aimed at fast tracking scientific knowledge on the state of the natural world to policymakers in order to reverse the losses of forests to fisheries, was given the green light at a meeting in Busan, Republic of Korea, in 2010 and endorsed by the UN General Assembly in December.

Another decision agreed today also supports improved cooperation between developing countries - the so-called South/South cooperation - on biodiversity as part of a new more than ten-year initiative.

- Governments requested UNEP to organize a major international meeting on how to accelerate cuts in pollution and wastes to seas and oceans under its Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities.

They also requested that UNEP works more closely with bodies such as the International Maritime Organization in order to catalyze action to reduce marine pollution from shipping.

- Governments also requested UNEP to work with the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in order to prepare a report on how the UN as a whole can better respond to environmental emergencies from droughts and floods to chemical and other spills.

The Government of Switzerland today announced funding of around US$300,000 in order to support this and related work on environment-linked emergency response and preparedness.

Various decisions on chemicals and hazardous wastes were agreed.

- Governments requested UNEP to see how the various chemicals and hazardous waste treaties-known as the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions-can work more closely together at the national level.

Nations also requested UNEP to build public awareness and strengthen the capacity and ability of developing countries, and in particular in Africa, in respect to the heavy metals lead and cadmium including the disposal of old batteries.

- Governments also approved UNEP's core Environment Fund for the period 2012-2013 at just over US$190 million.

Notes to Editors
March 1, 2011

Movement to save the Yamuna gains momentum

By Brij Khandelwal
Indian News Post

A movement launched by the ascetics and Sri Krishna devotees of the Braj Mandal to save the Yamuna river from pollution is now gaining momentum.

Agra/Gokul (IANS) -- Hundreds of ascetics and activists have reached Sangam (confluence) at Allahabad from where a long march to New Delhi is to start Wednesday.

Chief organisers Radha Krishan Shastri and Jai Krishan Das told IANS the march will reach the capital around April 15.

They said they will not withdraw till their demands are met and will talk only with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President Pratibha Patil or UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi.

For the next 45 days, river Yamuna will remain in the focus as the march moves towards New Delhi via smaller towns and villages. By the time it reaches Agra, the organisers hope it will gain sufficient momentum.

This is the first time that the alarming pollution in the Yamuna has attracted so many people who look determined to set things right, said eco-activist Ravi Singh in Agra.

The Supreme Court, meanwhile has directed the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to submit within three weeks reports of samples collected from the river, close to the drains, to get a clearer picture of the quality of water in the river.
"This could have serious repercussions and even put the Delhi government in the dock for failing to effectively tap the drains and discharge of industrial effluents in the river," D.K. Joshi, a member of the Supreme Court monitoring committee in Agra told IANS.

Water samples analysed by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) researcher Swabha Takshak in Agra paint an extremely dismal picture.

"All the parameters, including turbidity and hardness are wrong," she said.

The results of samples she tested over a 30-day period pointed to an alarming level of pollutants.

Swabha Takshak, who carried out the study in May 2010, said: "The river is dead for all practical purposes. It is extremely polluted with every kind of pollutant imaginable, including toxins and carcinogens."

In an unprecedented display of solidarity with the movement, temples in Gokul were closed for two hours to protest pollution of the river Yamuna Monday.

In the evening, thousands of locals, high priests of the Sri Krishna, Baldeo (elder brother of Krishna) and Nand Baba (father of Sri Krishna) temples joined a footmarch along the bank of Yamuna with thousands of followers. Markets too remained closed.

"This surely ranks as the most impressive people's protest against pollution of rivers," said Acharya Gopi Ballabh. For hours, people kept raising slogans "Yamuna Bachao, Pollution Bhagao" (Save Yamuna, Do away with pollution).

Residents of Gokul are particularly angry as a barrage constructed on Yamuna has distanced the historical banks of Gokul from the river.

"This is clearly a stupid example of engineering design. The river used to flow along the ghats (banks) but now the water has moved a kilometre away and pilgrims are being inconvenienced," said Vrindavan's Acharya Jaimini.


March 3, 2011

Solar energy spars with spiritual lands in California
New Scientist

NATIVE Americans in southern California do not see a bright side to the prospect of six new solar-energy projects crowding the Mohave, Sonoran and Colorado deserts they have called home for thousands of years.
A group called La Cuna de Aztlan Sacred Sites Protection Circle has united with activists to challenge the projects, which have been approved by the US government. The group claims that the facilities will threaten burial sites and ancient geoglyphs.

Work on the projects began in October last year, and in December those opposed filed a lawsuit. The projects include BrightSource Energy's 1500-hectare solar facility in Ivanpah Valley, Solar Millennium's proposed 2400-hectare solar thermal project, and the Chevron Energy Solutions solar facility in the Lucerne Valley.

Although permit records show that officials consulted with the California Native American Heritage Commission, La Cuna insists they didn't have a chance to negotiate. They say construction risks digging up as-yet undiscovered burial sites and the projects would ruin the spiritual value of the geoglyphs. In turn, the Bureau of Land Management contests the authenticity of some geoglyphs, claiming, for instance, that one 60-metre image of Kokopelli, a humpbacked, flute-playing fertility deity, is only 20 years old, not 10,000 years old.


March 22, 2011

Padyatra to Save Yamuna from Pollution

Times of India

KANPUR: Hundreds of `sadhus' from Braj Mandal, `bhakts' of Lord Krishna, farmers, environmentalists and residents of Etawah participated in a `padyatra’ to save the Yamuna from pollution.

The march which started from Allahabad on March 3, covered Kaushambi, Fatehpur, Kanpur and Auraiyya to reached Etawah on Tuesday.

A dharna will be held at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on April 15 to highlight the issue.

Holding placards and banners, the `patyatris’ assembled on the banks of Yamuna in Etawah and sang `bhajans’ and `kirtans’ in order to gather support for the cause.

“Yamuna, considered as a pious in mythology, is now counted among the most polluted rivers in India,” said Bhanu Pratap Singh, president Bhartiya Kisan Union, Mathura. Delhi alone contributes around 3,296 mld (million litres per day) of sewage in the form of drains which fall into the river. Lakhs of people are living in the slums on the banks of Yamuna river, he said. Shortage of sewage treatment plants and lack of sanitation facilities in Delhi are responsible for polluting the Yamuna. The problem is further compounded by lack of minimum perennial fresh water flow in the river along the stretch starting from Wazirabad, Singh added.
Addressing a gathering, Jai Krishna Das, a saint of Barsana, urged the people to join hands in saving the Yamuna.

“Our motive is to ensure maximum participation of people in the save river Yamuna campaign. We are covering villages and cities located on the banks of river Yamuna for the task. And it will only be possible when the people from every section of society join hands,” said Das.

“The Centre and the Delhi government should come forward and take initiative to open Wazirabad bandh. A kisan panchayat is to be held in Agra on April 1. If the authorities fail to take initiative, we will be forced to take some decision in the sit-in at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on April 15. The people from all walks of life should come forward and protect Yamuna otherwise it will be a history,” Singh added.


April 2, 2011

Tibetan Glaciers Melting, Dalai Lama Claims

The Huffington Post

NEW DELHI -- The Dalai Lama said Saturday that India should be seriously concerned about the melting of glaciers in the Tibetan plateau as millions of Indians use water that comes from there.

The Tibetan spiritual leader quoted Chinese experts as saying that the Tibetan glaciers were retreating faster than any elsewhere in the world.

He called for special attention to ecology in Tibet. "It's something very, very essential," he said.

The glaciers are considered vital lifelines for Asian rivers, including the Indus and the Ganges. Once they vanish, water supplies in those regions will be threatened.

As these major rivers come from the Tibetan plateau and "since millions of Indians use water coming from the Himalayan glacier, so you have certain right to show your concern about ecology of that plateau," the Dalai Lama told an audience of about 400 Indians.

He was speaking at the centenary celebrations of India's former President R. Venkataraman in New Delhi.

"India, a free country, I think should express more serious concern, that's I think important. This is nothing to do with politics, just everybody's interest, including Chinese people also," he said.
Rising demand has put a strain on access to freshwater in India and China – which are home to more than a third of the world's population.


April 4, 2011

Fracturing Logic
America Magazine

A classic conflict between science in the public interest and science for private profit appears likely as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency prepares for a comprehensive study of the ecological hazards of the method of extracting natural gas called hydrofracturing. “Fracking,” as the practice is informally known, is a horizontal drilling procedure that includes the injection of millions of gallons of pressurized water, sand and industrial solvents into the earth to release pockets of natural gas from shale that has trapped it for millennia. Even as proponents of expanding natural gas drilling—particularly in the Marcellus shale formation under Pennsylvania and New York—protest that the procedure is safe, more evidence has been emerging that this may not be so.

A gas rush in Pennsylvania has resulted in hundreds of new fracking sites, but many people at the surface are not sharing in the wealth being generated by the natural gas boom. Instead, they are dealing with illnesses and contaminated water supplies they attribute to the chemicals, gases and other contaminants churned up by fracking. Local residents say fracking has brought a variety of ailments for well-water users, including headaches, dizziness, memory loss, gastrointestinal complaints and worse, and serious injury to cattle that have drunk waste water from drill sites. Long-term health effects are uncertain. Some of the chemicals injected into the earth to “loosen up” shale are known carcinogens and endocrine-system disruptors.

Other well-water users say leaking gases from improperly installed or maintained drill-site casing has resulted in exploding wells and flaming water faucets. In Arkansas, two natural gas producers voluntarily agreed to cease operations as evidence mounts that the disposal of vast quantities of fracking water by injecting it back into the ground has triggered a “swarm” of earthquakes in the state.

E.P.A. scientists are being pressured by industry lobbyists and politicians indebted to natural gas producers to withhold evidence of possible harm from fracking or simply to refrain from fully investigating the many ways the technique could produce an ecologically damaging or carcinogenic result. In fact, over the last 25 years a number of critical E.P.A. findings on fracking have been kept hidden or proposed studies restricted to keep potentially critical findings from being disseminated. A 1987 determination that the practice was indeed hazardous and required strict regulation was simply dropped from an E.P.A. report under pressure from the Reagan administration; and last year the E.P.A., bowing again to political pressure, abandoned a call for a moratorium on fracking in the New York City watershed. But what is not known about
fracking can indeed harm the environment and local communities. Among areas of greatest
cconcern are how to treat and dispose of, or safely reuse, the millions of gallons of contaminated
water fracking produces. At risk is the drinking water of millions of U.S. residents, which could
become contaminated with solvents, salts and radioactive debris produced by fracking at well
water sites. Contaminated water can also pass through inadequate treatment processes and then
be dumped into vital waterways.

Natural gas is touted as a responsible energy option during a time of anxiety about climate
change and spiking international oil costs and heightened awareness of the risks from nuclear
power; and indeed the United States has reserves of natural gas in abundance. But is this
presumably cheap alternative energy source really so inexpensive? Or is the current generation
of energy users merely passing on the true cost of natural gas drilling to their children and
grandchildren? Someone will have to pay to mitigate environmental damages left behind by
fracking; someone must pay to clean the water and restore the drill sites and to heal the people
whose land and bodies are contaminated by fracking.

Good stewardship of creation and the call to protect human dignity sound like weak concerns—
to some—when the hard challenges of the current energy dilemma are brought up. The public
can put aside moral obligations to the people and the property left behind when the natural gas
boom ends and can ignore the ethical issues involved in one generation’s squandering the fossil
fuel wealth of creation in a few short decades. But can the nation not at least agree that the
science should be objective and trustworthy when looking into a practice with such complex
repercussions for today and for the future? The E.P.A. should produce a thorough and unbiased
analysis of the dangers and economic threats of this emerging industry. That way when we
citizens make decisions and commitments about energy production and use, we will clearly
understand what we are paying for now and what we are costing the future.

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=12791

April 6, 2011

10 Teachings on Judaism and the Environment

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Huffington Post

1. God created the universe.

This is the most fundamental concept of Judaism. Its implications are that only God has absolute
ownership over Creation (Gen. 1-2, Psalm 24:1, I Chron. 29:10-16). Thus, Judaism's worldview
is theocentric not anthropocentric. The environmental implications are that humans must realize
that they do not have unrestricted freedom to misuse Creation, as it does not belong to them.
Everything we own, everything we use ultimately belongs to God. Even our own selves belong
to God. As a prayer in the High Holiday liturgy proclaims, "The soul is Yours and the body is
your handiwork." As we are "sojourners with You, mere transients like our ancestors; our days
on earth are like a shadow..." (1 Chronicles 29:15), we must always consider our use of Creation
with a view to the larger good in both time (responsibility to future generations) and space (others on this world). We must also think beyond our own species to that of all Creation.

2. God's Creation is good.

In Genesis 1:31, when God found all of Creation to be "very good," this means several things. First of all it means that Creation is sufficient, structured and ordered (the rabbis called it Seder Bereishit, the Order of Creation). It is also harmonious. It exists to serve God (Psalm 148). This order reflects God's wisdom (Psalm 104:24), which is beyond human understanding (Psalm 92:6-7, Job 38-39). All of God's creations are consequently part of the Order of Creation and all are subject to its nature (Psalm 148). Humans are also part of the Order, which can be said to be a community of worshipers.

3. Human beings are created in the image of God.

Human beings have a special place and role in the Order of Creation. Of all God's creations, only human beings have the power to disrupt Creation. This power, which gives them a kind of control over Creation, comes from special characteristics that no other creature possesses (Psalm 8). This idea is expressed in the concept that humans were created in the image of God (tzelem Elohim). In its original sense, tzelem Elohim means that humans were put on the earth to act as God's agents and to actualize God's presence in Creation.

This also has ethical implications which stem from the fact that human beings have certain intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness. It also means that human beings possess God-like capacities: power, consciousness, relationship, will, freedom and life. Human beings are supposed to exercise their power, consciousness and free will to be wise stewards of Creation. They should help to maintain the Order of Creation even while they are allowed to use it for their own benefit within certain limits established by God (Genesis 2:14). This balance applies to both human society as well to the natural world. Since the time of the expulsion from Garden of Eden, Creation has tended to be out of balance because of the human impulse toward inequality resulting from the misuse of its powers for selfish ends. The earth is morally sensitive to human misdeeds (Genesis 4, Leviticus 18:27-30).

4. Humanity should view their place in Creation with love and awe.

It may be said that there are two books of God's revelation to humanity: The Torah and Creation itself. The book of Creation can help us to perceive ourselves as "living breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems." (Mitchell Thomashow, Ecological Identity) This knowledge is gained both through an understanding of Creation through scientific knowledge. In Judaism, this can be understood as the fulfillment of the commandments to love and to fear God (Deuteronomy 6:5,13). Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204) interpreted these commandments in the following way:

"When a person observes God's works and God's great and marvelous creatures, and they see from them God's wisdom that is without estimate or end, immediately they will love God, praise
God and long with a great desire to know God's Great Name ... And when a person thinks about these things they draw back and are afraid and realizes that they are small, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of God who is perfect in knowledge" (Mishneh Torah, Sepher Madah, Hikhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:1-2).

Thus, when we study Creation with all the tools of modern science, we are filled with love and a sense of connection to a greater order of things. We feel a sense of wonder but also a sense of awe and humility as we perceive how small we are in the universe as well as within the history of evolution. Love and humility should then invoke in us a sense of reverence for Creation and modesty in our desire to use it. We should, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel, see the world as God-centered, not human-centered. By putting God at the center of life, we see the sacred in everything and the natural world becomes a source of wonder and not only a resource for our use and abuse.

5. The Sabbath and prayer help us to achieve this state of mind.

The Sabbath is a way to begin to engender this sense of love and humility before Creation. It is also a way to living a sustainable life. For one day out of seven, we limit our use of resources. We walk to attend synagogue and drive only when walking is not possible. We do not cook and we do not shop. We can use the day for relaxation, contemplation and to ask ourselves: What is the real purpose of human life? Are we here on earth only to get and to spend? As Rabbi Schorsch has written: "To rest is to acknowledge our limitations. Willful inactivity is a statement of subservience to a power greater than our own" (To Till and to Tend, page 20).

Prayer also helps us to recognize that everything we are, everything we have and everything we use ultimately comes from God (Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 35a). When we say a blessing, we create a moment or holiness, a sacred pause. Prayer also creates an awareness of the sacred by taking us out of ourselves and our artificial environments and allowing us to truly encounter natural phenomenon. Prayer creates a loss of control which allows us to "see the world in the mirror of the holy." (Heschel) We are then able to see the world as an object of divine concern and we can then place ourselves beyond self and more deeply within Creation.

6. The Torah prohibits the wasteful consumption of anything.

In Judaism, the halakhah (Jewish law) prohibits wasteful consumption. When we waste resources we are violating the mitzvah (commandment) of Bal Tashhit ("Do not destroy"). It is based on Deuteronomy 20:19-20:

"When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do no yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced."
This law was expanded in later Jewish legal sources to include the prohibition of the wanton destruction of household goods, clothes, buildings, springs, food or the wasteful consumption of anything (see Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8, 10; Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, 279-80). The underlying idea of this law is the recognition that everything we own belongs to God. When we consume in a wasteful manner, we damage Creation and violate our mandate to use Creation only for our legitimate benefit. Modesty in consumption is a value that Jews have held for centuries. For example, one is not supposed to be excessive in eating and drinking or in the kind of clothes that one wears (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Discernment, chapter 5). Jews are obligated to consider carefully our real needs whenever we purchase anything. We are obligated when we have a simchah (a celebration) to consider whether we need to have elaborate meals and wasteful decorations. We are obligated to consider our energy use and the sources from which it comes.

7. The Torah gives an obligation to save human life.

The Jewish tradition mandates an obligation to save and preserve life (called in Jewish legal sources: pikuach nefesh) based on an interpretation of Leviticus 18:5, "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord (See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a)." Jewish law forbids us from knowingly harming ourselves (Leviticus 19:28). There are also numerous sources mandated the proper disposal of waste is properly and that noxious products from industrial production must be kept far from human habitation (see for example, Deuteronomy 23:13-15, Mishnah Baba Batra 2:9). In the Jewish tradition, the public good overrides individual desires.

While there are many useful and even lifesaving technologies that come from modern chemicals and materials, we have an obligation to be cautious in their use. Pikuach nefesh demands that we consider the impact of our use of chemicals and other materials, not only in the short term but also in the long term. For the Jewish tradition, the Precautionary Principle can be seen as a modern form of the warning not to tamper too much with the boundaries of Creation.

8. The Torah prohibits the extinction of species and causing undo pain to non-human creatures.

Our ancestors could not have anticipated the loss of biodiversity that the modern world has produced; from their perspective, there was no natural extinction rate of species. God, they believed, had created all species at one time and there could be no new creatures. Only humans could cause extinction and bring about the loss of one of the members of the Creation choir. In the Torah there is a law that says:

"If along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life" (Deuteronomy 22:6-7).

Ramban (Moses ben Nachman, Nachmanides, 1194-1270) in his commentary to the Torah wrote:
"This also is an explanatory commandment of the prohibition you shall not kill it [the mother] and its young both in one day (Leviticus 22:28). The reason for both [commandments] is that we should not have a cruel heart and not be compassionate, or it may be that Scripture does not permit us to destroy a species altogether, although it permits slaughter [for food] within that group. Now the person who kills the mother and the young in one day or takes them when they are free to fly, [it is regarded] as though they have destroyed that species."

It is evident from the first chapter of Genesis and other Biblical texts (Psalm 104, 148 and Job 38-41) that God takes care of, and takes pleasure in, the variety of life that makes up Creation. And although we might regard a species as unimportant or bothersome to human beings, God does not regard them so. The rabbis understood that we do not know God's purpose for every creature and that we should not regard any of them as superfluous. "Our Rabbis said: Even those things that you may regard as completely superfluous to Creation -- such as fleas, gnats and flies -- even they were included in Creation; and God's purpose is carried through everything -- even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, a frog" (Breishit Rabbah 10:7). In environmental terms, every species has an inherent value beyond its instrumental or useful value to human beings. Related to this idea is the concept of Tzar Baalei Chayyim, the prohibition of hurting animals without good purpose (based on Deuteronomy 22:6, 22:10, 25:4, Numbers 22:32, Exodus 20:8-10, Leviticus 22:27-8). These concepts bring to our relationships with the non-human world limits and controls over our power and greed.

9. Environmental Justice is a Jewish value.

The Torah has numerous laws which attempt to redress the power and economic imbalances in human society and Creation. Examples are the Sabbatical year (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 25:2-5, Deuteronomy 15:1-4) and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-24) There is a whole program in the Torah for creating a balanced distribution of resources across society (Exodus 22:24-26, Leviticus 25:36-37, Deuteronomy 23:20-1, 24:6,10-13,17). This is an expression of the concept of Tzedeke, which means righteousness, justice and equity. It is the value, which tries to correct the imbalances, which humans create in society and in the natural world. In the modern world, globalization has strived to achieve the free movement of people, information, money, goods and services, but it can also create major disruptions in local cultures and environments. While globalization has created great wealth for millions of people, many millions more have been bypassed by its benefits and has had in some cases a negative impact upon the environment and human rights. The Jewish concept of Tzedeke demands that we create a worldwide economy that is sustainable and that is equitable in the distribution of wealth and resources.

10. Tikkun Olam: The perfection/fixing of the world is in our hands.

There is a midrash (rabbinic commentary on the Bible) which Jewish environmentalists are fond of quoting:

"When God created the first human beings, God led them around the garden of Eden and said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are -- how excellent! For your sake I created them
all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it" (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13)

In the Jewish liturgy there is a prayer called Aleinu in which we ask that the world be soon perfected under the sovereignty of God (l'takein olam b'nalkhut Shaddai). Tikkun olam, the perfecting or the repairing of the world, has become a major theme in modern Jewish social justice theology. It is usually expressed as an activity that must be done by humans in partnership with God. It is an important concept in light of the task ahead in environmentalism. In our ignorance and our greed, we have damaged the world and silenced many of the voices of the choir of Creation. Now we must fix it. There is no one else to repair it but us.

A version of this was originally published at GreenFaith.org.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-lawrence-troster/10-teachings-on-judaism-a_b_844973.html

April 9, 2011

Green Passover: Taking Responsibility for People and Planet

By Rabbi Edward C. Bernstein
The Huffington Post

"[God said], 'For the Land is Mine. You are but strangers and sojourners with Me" (Leviticus 25:23).

"In every generation, each person is obligated to see him or herself as having gone out from Mitzraim (Egypt) [from slavery to freedom]." These words are central to the liturgy of the Passover seder, observed this year on the evenings of April 18 and 19. They are intended to invoke the central historical narrative of Passover, the Exodus, and its moral, eternal message that all human beings are created in the image of God and are all of equal dignity. While the Exodus narrative plays a central role in the Jewish observance of Passover, it doesn't tell the whole story.

The major Jewish festivals all have historical reasons for their celebration: Passover commemorates the Exodus; Shavuot, the revelation of God at Mt. Sinai; Sukkot, the booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. At the same time, the Bible itself portrays the festivals as rooted in the agricultural cycle of the year. As Passover approaches, it's worthy to examine this nexus between the historical and agricultural origins of the holiday. I believe that their convergence speaks to our generation in a fresh, meaningful way with respect to our stewardship of the environment. Our physical and spiritual freedom today depends on our society rediscovering and appreciating the earth as a web of life of which humanity is a part.
The Hebrew Bible presents a deep connection between the spring time reawakening of the earth from its winter slumber and ancient Israelite rituals to mark the change of seasons. The festival takes place in the month of Aviv (spring), so the rituals associated with the festival are richly connected to the seasonal cycle of the year. The Biblical text describes the Lord's Passover that takes place at dusk on the 14th day of the first month at which time the Paschal lamb was sacrificed. The next day, the 15th of the month, is the Festival of Matzot/Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:5-6). It has been suggested by Biblical scholars that the Passover offering was an ancient Near Eastern spring time festival among shepherds offering thanks to a divinity for sustaining their flocks and allowing them to reproduce. The Festival of Matzot was a spring time observance marking the beginning of the grain harvest. The ancient Israelites took these disparate rites of spring and imbued them with greater significance as part of the annual commemoration of the Exodus. (See also My Jewish Learning on Passover origins).

As Judaism has evolved over the ages and as Jews in the modern world have adopted multiple levels of observance, Passover continues to capture the collective Jewish imagination and the Jewish communal yearning for freedom and respect for human dignity throughout society. At the same time, the rituals of the holiday are connected so deeply to the earth and its seasons. It is as if the earth is listening to our celebration of freedom and crying out, "Me too!"

When the liturgy of the seder calls on us to travel back in time to experience the transformation from slavery to freedom, we can also imagine a time when human beings were more at one with the land, the seasons and the entire natural world. If we take the wisdom of the ancient Israelites back into our own day, we might discover our society's collective transformation to a culture of consumption that is destroying our planet and destroying our souls from within. In upcoming postings of this blog, I hope to explore more in depth specific areas of concern in which the earth and human society are suffering as a result of human exploitation of the earth and ways in which contemporary readings of classical Jewish sources can enhance our communal conversation on creating more sustainable lifestyles.

Regarding Passover, let me conclude with some practical tips to create a more eco-friendly Passover:

• Donate to food pantries. In the season of spring cleaning, many Jewish households take seriously the observance ridding the home of chametz, leavened, grain-based food products. Don't waste it. Pass it on to those in need.
• Buy local, in-season, produce where possible. Minimize your carbon footprint and support farmers near your home community.
• Avoid disposable plates and cutlery. This environmentally unfriendly practice has crept into many traditional homes where year-round utensils are not used for the chametz-free holiday. This Passover, let's reduce waste while eliminating chametz. Consult a rabbi or published guides for kashering (making fit) utensils for Passover use, and/or consider purchasing Passover-only utensils.

Humanity is intended to be a guardian of the earth, not a plunderer of its resources that will enslave future generations to greed, consumption and waste. Passover calls on us to act sustainably toward each other and toward the earth. I look forward to our further explorations of Judaism and environmental stewardship.
April 10, 2011

10 Hindu Environmental Teachings

By Pankaj Jain
Huffington Post

Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in its Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Sutras and its other sacred texts. Millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit mantras daily to revere their rivers, mountains, trees, animals and the earth. Although the Chipko (tree-hugging) Movement is the most widely known example of Hindu environmental leadership, there are examples of Hindu action for the environment that are centuries old.

Hinduism is a remarkably diverse religious and cultural phenomenon, with many local and regional manifestations. Within this universe of beliefs, several important themes emerge. The diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that:

• The earth can be seen as a manifestation of the goddess, and must be treated with respect.
• The five elements -- space, air, fire, water and earth -- are the foundation of an interconnected web of life.
• Dharma -- often translated as "duty" -- can be reinterpreted to include our responsibility to care for the earth.
• Simple living is a model for the development of sustainable economies.
• Our treatment of nature directly affects our karma.

Gandhi exemplified many of these teachings, and his example continues to inspire contemporary social, religious and environmental leaders in their efforts to protect the planet.

The following are 10 important Hindu teachings on the environment:

1. **Pancha Mahabhutas (The five great elements) create a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of the cosmos and the human body.** Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (space, air, fire, water and earth) that constitute the environment are all derived from prakriti, the primal energy. Each of these elements has its own life and form; together the elements are interconnected and interdependent. The Upanishads explains the interdependence of these elements in relation to Brahman, the supreme reality, from which they arise: "From Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water, and from water arises earth."

Hinduism recognizes that the human body is composed of and related to these five elements, and connects each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air and ears to space. This bond between our senses and the
elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world. For Hinduism, nature and the environment are not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence, and they constitute our very bodies.

2. **Ishavasyam -- Divinity is omnipresent and takes infinite forms.** Hindu texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* (7.19, 13.13) and the *Bhagavad Purana* (2.2.41, 2.2.45), contain many references to the omnipresence of the Supreme divinity, including its presence throughout and within nature. Hindus worship and accept the presence of God in nature. For example, many Hindus think of India's mighty rivers -- such as the Ganges -- as goddesses. In the *Mahabharata*, it is noted that the universe and every object in it has been created as an abode of the Supreme God meant for the benefit of all, implying that individual species should enjoy their role within a larger system, in relationship with other species.

3. **Protecting the environment is part of Dharma.** Dharma, one of the most important Hindu concepts, has been translated into English as duty, virtue, cosmic order and religion. In Hinduism, protecting the environment is an important expression of dharma. In past centuries, Indian communities -- like other traditional communities -- did not have an understanding of "the environment" as separate from the other spheres of activity in their lives.

A number of rural Hindu communities such as the Bishnois, Bhils and Swadhyaya have maintained strong communal practices to protect local ecosystems such as forests and water sources. These communities carry out these conservation-oriented practices not as "environmental" acts but rather as expressions of dharma. When Bishnois are protecting animals and trees, when Swadhyayis are building *Vrikshamandiras* (tree temples) and *Nirmal Nirs* (water harvesting sites) and when Bhils are practicing their rituals in sacred groves, they are simply expressing their reverence for creation according to Hindu teachings, not "restoring the environment." These traditional Indian groups do not see religion, ecology and ethics as separate arenas of life. Instead, they understand it to be part of their dharma to treat creation with respect.

4. **Our environmental actions affect our karma.** Karma, a central Hindu teaching, holds that each of our actions creates consequences -- good and bad -- which constitute our karma and determine our future fate, including the place we will assume when we are reincarnated in our next life. Moral behavior creates good karma, and our behavior toward the environment has karmic consequences. Because we have free choice, even though we may have harmed the environment in the past, we can choose to protect the environment in the future, replacing environmentally destructive karmic patterns with good ones.

5. **The earth -- Devi -- is a goddess and our mother and deserves our devotion and protection.** Many Hindu rituals recognize that human beings benefit from the earth, and offer gratitude and protection in response. Many Hindus touch the floor before getting out of bed every morning and ask Devi to forgive them for trampling on her body. Millions of Hindus create *kolams* daily -- artwork consisting of bits of rice or other food placed at their doorways in the morning. These kolams express Hindu's desire to offer sustenance to the earth, just as the earth sustains themselves. The Chipko movement -- made famous by Chipko women's commitment to "hugging" trees in their community to protect them from clear-cutting by outside interests -- represents a similar devotion to the earth.
6. Hinduism's tantric and yogic traditions affirm the sacredness of material reality and contain teachings and practices to unite people with divine energy. Hinduism's Tantric tradition teaches that the entire universe is the manifestation of divine energy. Yoga, derived from the Sanskrit word meaning "to yoke" or "to unite," refers to a series of mental and physical practices designed to connect the individual with this divine energy. Both these traditions affirm that all phenomena, objects and individuals are expressions of the divine. And because these traditions both envision the earth as a goddess, contemporary Hindu teachers have used these teachings to demonstrate the wrongness of the exploitation of the environment, women and indigenous peoples.

7. Belief in reincarnation supports a sense of interconnectedness of all creation. Hindus believe in the cycle of rebirth, wherein every being travels through millions of cycles of birth and rebirth in different forms, depending on their karma from previous lives. So a person may be reincarnated as a person, animal, bird or another part of the wider community of life. Because of this, and because all people are understood to pass through many lives on their pathway to ultimate liberation, reincarnation creates a sense of solidarity between people and all living things.

Through belief in reincarnation, Hinduism teaches that all species and all parts of the earth are part of an extended network of relationships connected over the millennia, with each part of this network deserving respect and reverence.

8. Non-violence -- *ahimsa* -- is the greatest dharma. Ahimsa to the earth improves one's karma. For observant Hindus, hurting or harming another being damages one's karma and obstructs advancement toward *moksha* -- liberation. To prevent the further accrual of bad karma, Hindus are instructed to avoid activities associated with violence and to follow a vegetarian diet.

Based on this doctrine of ahimsa, many observant Hindus oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds and fish for human consumption.

9. Sanyasa (asceticism) represents a path to liberation and is good for the earth. Hinduism teaches that asceticism -- restraint in consumption and simplicity in living -- represents a pathway toward moksha (liberation), which treats the earth with respect. A well-known Hindu teaching -- *Tain tyakten bhunjitha* -- has been translated, "Take what you need for your sustenance without a sense of entitlement or ownership."

One of the most prominent Hindu environmental leaders, Sunderlal Bahuguna, inspired many Hindus by his ascetic lifestyle. His repeated fasts and strenuous foot marches, undertaken to support and spread the message of the Chipko, distinguished him as a notable ascetic in our own time. In his capacity for suffering and his spirit of self-sacrifice, Hindus saw a living example of the renunciation of worldly ambition exhorted by Hindu scriptures.

10. Gandhi is a role model for simple living. Gandhi's entire life can be seen as an ecological treatise. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion or thought functioned much like an ecosystem: his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as
much as of the big, his spinning wheel, his abhorrence of waste, his resorting to basic Hindu and Jain values of truth, nonviolence, celibacy and fasting. The moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers and environmentalists all take their inspirations from Gandhi's life and writings.

(Acknowledgement: Adapted from the essays by Christopher K. Chapple, O. P. Dwivedi, K. L. Seshagiri Rao, Vinay Lal, and George A. James in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* and *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life*, both published by Harvard University Press. Thanks also to the essays by Harold Coward and Rita DasGupta Sherma in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, published by SUNY Press. I am also indebted to kind comments by Reverend Fletcher Harper and for his invitation to write this article.)

*A version of this post was published originally via GreenFaith: Interfaith Partners for the Environment.*

**Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies)**

*by Pankaj Jain*

Follow Pankaj Jain, Ph.D. on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/pankajaindia](http://www.twitter.com/pankajaindia)


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**April 11, 2011**

Bishop calls for ‘green’ trash-free Holy Week

By Jocelyn Uy

 Philippine Daily Inquirer

MANILA, Philippines -- Here's another way of atoning for one's sins aside from self-flagellation and crucifixion: observe the Holy Week entirely "green" and free from trash.

Caloocan Bishop Deogracias Iñiguez posed this challenge to penitents as he echoed calls of an environmental group, EcoWaste Coalition, for a greener Holy Week, shunning practices that would involve wasteful consumption of natural resources.

"A green Holy Week is a timely call in response to the wastefulness and greed that is blatantly trashing our fragile environment," said Iñiguez, head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Permanent Committee on Public Affairs, in a statement on Monday.

"I encourage everyone to plan for an earth-friendly and spiritually nourishing week," Iñiguez added.
The EcoWaste Coalition has listed several "down-to-earth" suggestions and guidelines, which the faithful could observe during the Holy Week with the planet in mind:

Pilgrims can help Mother Earth during the Holy Week by picking up litter that they see along the "Alay Lakad" route from Ortigas Avenue Extension to Antipolo City.

To cut back on fuel consumption, the traditional Visita Iglesia can be carried out online courtesy of a website http://visitaiglesia.net recently launched by the CBCP.

* Use handkerchiefs instead of tissue paper to battle the heat during penitential services and liturgical celebrations like the "Via Crucis" (Stations of the Cross), according to the group.

* Postpone expensive, non-essential long distance trips and think about donating the money saved to the Catholic Church's "Alay Kapwa" program or to any of your favorite charitable causes.

* Avoid over-decorating carrozas or floats for the Good Friday "Santo Entierro" (holy burial) procession by adorning them with only biodegradable decors and natural flowers and plants like sampaguita.

* Keep the "pabasa" a healthy neighborhood spiritual event by making the "kubol" and its immediate vicinity a "no smoking and no drinking" zone.

* Keep the Easter celebration or "Salubong" simple and free from firecrackers and confetti. Easter egg hunts can also be healthy and earth-friendly by only using natural ingredients or dyes to color the eggs.

"We are inviting the faithful to celebrate the Holy Week with a pledge to cut back on garbage and pollution as part of our spiritual works of penance, charity and reconciliation," said Roy Alvarez, president of the EcoWaste Coalition.

"The fact that Earth Day this year falls on Good Friday is indeed good for the environment as this should mean less cars on the streets, less energy use in malls, less noise, less non-essential consumption and less garbage," he added.


April 13, 2011

Hindu Perspectives on the Environment: Interview with Pankaj Jain

Paradise Parking Lot
Progressive Radio Network
April 15, 2011

SEED Initiative celebrates entrepreneurs accelerating transition to a Green Economy

United Nations Environment Programme

Pretoria (South Africa) / Nairobi - Nearly 200 participants of a Green Economy symposium organized by the SEED Initiative, which is hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), met today with the 30 global winners of the SEED Awards to look at ways to accelerate the transition to a Green Economy in the developing world.

The Symposium focused on policies needed to accelerate the transition to a Green Economy and on the environmental and social contribution of community-level entrepreneurs in developing countries.

The SEED Awards recognize inspiring social and environmental entrepreneurs whose businesses can help meet sustainable development challenges, boost local economies and alleviate poverty. By helping entrepreneurs to scale-up their activities, SEED aims to refocus policies towards promoting Green Economic initiatives such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, water and waste management, eco-friendly tourism and green construction and transport.

The latest SEED Award winners largely come from Africa, placing particular emphasis on initiatives from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa. Together with Egypt, these are pilot countries in a joint project between SEED and UNEP's Green Economy Initiative which is funded largely by the European Union.

Among the winners were a bamboo bicycle project in Ghana that makes use of the country's vast bamboo supplies, a Ugandan enterprise manufacturing stationary from agricultural waste, a Chinese project producing a novel solar device that turns waste heat into electricity and a South African female-run business making a hand-held laundry device that saves water and cuts pollution.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "The SEED winners underline how the green shoots of a Green Economy are sprouting across the developing world. Governments and public policymakers can learn a lot from how these entrepreneurs have catalyzed creative solutions to local challenges and in doing so generated livelihoods, employment, environmental benefits and ways of eradicating poverty within and outside their communities."
"Next year's Rio+20 meeting is an opportunity to scale-up and accelerate these kinds of transitions. Our SEED winners offer valuable insights and knowledge on what works and how best this can be realized," he added.

UNEP's Green Economy report, launched earlier this year, shows that investing only two per cent of global GDP into ten key sectors can kick-start a transition towards a low carbon, resource-efficient economy. The report also highlights the Green Economy as a key catalyst for growth and poverty eradication in developing countries, where in some cases close to 90 per cent of the GDP of the poor is linked to natural capital.

Ibrahim Patel, South Africa's Minister of Economic Development said: "The State has a role in supporting small and micro enterprise and the social economy. These activities are crucial for providing new economic opportunities, but there continue to be difficulties in accessing private financing. The Green Economy will be a focus of the Economic Development Department's work in the year ahead."

A SEED Initiative survey, which was also launched today, confirmed that there is little doubt that the majority of local enterprises working on green initiatives are changing the model on how to deliver sustainable development at the community level.

The baseline survey, *An Investigation into the Triple Bottom Line Performance of Micro and Small Social and Environmental Enterprise in Developing Countries*, was carried out among winners and applicants to past competitions to see how the enterprises were delivering on social, environmental and business objectives and what policy makers have to do to create an enabling environment for such enterprises to thrive.

According to the survey, the SEED winners are bringing change through capacity training and skills development as well as the introduction of new and more environmentally-friendly technologies and production processes. Moreover, over half of the respondents reported that over 50 percent of those being trained are women.

However, the survey also underlined that two of the biggest obstacles for the success of these enterprises are lack of access to funds and lack of skilled people at the community level. Only 13 percent of respondents indicated that their financing was in place and less than a fifth were able to make a living from their enterprises.

By tracking the progress of the firms as they grow, SEED seeks to understand what policy and decision makers need to do to allow these enterprises to contribute to a greener economy in the developing world.

"As a company, we have recognized the need for sustainable, green development and believe in taking this into the grassroots of South African enterprises. We believe that the SEED Awards strongly mirror our company culture of innovation through hard work and are extremely proud to be associated with UNEP," said Jerry Liu, General Manager for Hisense, South Africa, who are the SEED Awards' corporate sponsor.
All the SEED winners have received a package of individually-tailored support for their business that includes access to relevant expertise and technical assistance, meeting new partners, developing business plans and identifying sources of finance.

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Notes to Editors:

SEED Initiative

The SEED Initiative is a global network founded in 2002 by UNEP, UNDP and IUCN to contribute towards the Millennium Development Goals and the commitments made at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. SEED works through a global network of partners, supporters and associates.

SEED identifies profiles and supports promising, locally-driven start-up enterprises working in partnership in developing countries to improve livelihoods, tackle poverty and marginalisation and manage natural resources sustainably. The Initiative also develops learning resources for the broad community of social and environmental entrepreneurs, informs policy- and decision-makers and aims to inspire innovative, entrepreneurial approaches to sustainable development.

Hisense:

Founded in 1969 as a small radio factory in China, Hisense has grown into a global conglomerate with a workforce of over 60,000 worldwide. Hisense is today recognized as a leading international company for consumer electronics and household appliances. The company puts a strong emphasis on innovation and quality and has a global R&D network of over 2000 engineers as well as a national-level R&D Center, a post-doctoral research workstation, and a state-of-the-art multimedia technology laboratory. It has been the recipient of several recognitions and awards in the name of innovation, technology, design, and quality management.

The 2010 SEED Award winners (by country):

Burkina Faso:
• "Manufacture and Popularization of Biomass Briquettes". Aiming to replace wood and charcoal with biomass briquettes from fallen leaves and other sources of unused biomass, this progressive enterprise of local and international NGOs and a research institution helps to combat desertification, create jobs in rural communities and raise awareness for alternative energy sources.

• "Initiative for Promoting and Distributing Bio-Pesticides". The initiative's ambitious goal is to promote and distribute ecological pest control for organic crops, especially cotton, vegetable and oil-producing crops. In this way, the partnership of local and community-based organisations and research agencies hopes to increase yields and preserve the production environment.

China:

• "SolSource" is a satellite dish-shaped solar device with removable modules that turns its own waste heat into electricity or stores it in thermal fabrics for later use. This novel device, which has been developed by an international social enterprise, research and government institutions, and local organizations, harnesses the sun's energy to provide a portable heat source for cooking and electricity for low-income families at an affordable price.

Colombia:

• "BOSQUE HUMEDO BIODIVERSO" is a business initiative headed by a local NGO that uses fruit and pulp as ingredients for the local cosmetics and food industries. The use of non-timber products will reduce deforestation of tropical forests and local families will benefit from collecting value-added goods. This helps develop alternative income sources and promotes the sustainable management of local biodiversity.

Ghana:

• "The Shea Economic Empowerment Program (SEEP)". This fruitful partnership centred on a community-based cooperative and international NGOs seeks to improve the livelihoods of women Shea nut producers by offering training, greater ownership within the supply chain and access to improved technology.

• "G-lish: Income Generation, Re-Generation, Next Generation". The aim of this remarkable initiative of local NGOs is to provide value-added income for rural communities by crafting baskets from recycled materials. In doing so, they preserve the age-old basket-weaving tradition and carry out extensive tree-planting operations.

• "High-value Syrup from 'Prekese' Fruits for Community Livelihood Empowerment". Relying on local raw materials, the partners of this promising initiative strive to establish the sustainable cultivation and harvesting of Prekese fruits in rural communities, allowing income to be generated over the whole life cycle of the tree.

• "Ghana Bamboo Bikes Initiative" is a youth-led, non-profit enterprise committed to the economic empowerment of youth by taking advantage of the abundant bamboo raw materials in Ghana to manufacture and assemble high-quality bamboo bikes suitable for the road conditions and terrain in Ghana and affordable to the poor.
• "DeCo! - Decentralized Composting for Sustainable Farming and Development". The composting firm DeCO! benefits local farmers by producing organic fertiliser in decentralised composting plants following a low-tech approach. By working with local NGOs, government and research institutes, DeCO! aims to inform and educate farmers about the advantages of sustainable soil management.

• "Biofuel Production in Promoting Sustainable Land Management". A local NGO in partnership with national research institutions has established a model for rehabilitating degraded community lands, producing food crop and utilising renewable energy through the cultivation and processing of sunflower plants into oil and biodiesel. Their sustainable land management approach also includes bee-keeping.

Kenya:

• "Backpack Farm Agriculture Program". This initiative enables food autonomy for rural communities by providing small landholders with a dynamic set of agricultural tools, comprehensive training and monitoring delivered and distributed in a canvas backpack.

• "Papyrus Reeds, Our Future Hope" is a sustainable enterprise that harvests and processes papyrus reeds and crafts them into high-quality baskets, purses, carpets, chairs, sleeping mats and blankets, using the waste as natural manure. Community-based youth organisations and a local research institution implement the initiative.

• "Solanterns: Replacing 1 Million Kerosene Lanterns with 1 Million Solar Lanterns". The partners of this innovative initiative are a private company, a local NGO and a microfinance institution that provide economic, environmental and health benefits to both rural and urban households by sourcing and distributing solar lanterns and training youth micro-entrepreneurs.

• "Community-Based Medicinal Plant Enterprise for Biodiversity Conservation". This pioneering enterprise initiated by a community-based organisation and national and international government and research institutions generates alternative means of income and awareness for the value of biodiversity within rural communities based on the commercial cultivation and processing of indigenous medicinal plants.

• "Village Cereal Aggregation Centres (VCAC)". A local commercial entity has joined forces with the national government, the financial sector and cereal buyers to establish mobile post-harvest management centres in villages enabling farmers to deliver high-quality grain to the market value chain and encouraging more participation of youth in cereal production.

• "EcoPost - Fencing Posts from Recycled Post-Consumer Waste Plastic". International and national NGOs have launched this unique initiative to recycle waste plastic into aesthetic, durable and environmentally-friendly fencing posts and consequently reduce plastic litter on streets and open fields. By providing an alternative fencing material to traditional wood, EcoPost contributes towards the conservation of forests.

• "Commercialization of Prosopis Juliflora Products from Affected Areas". A local community-based NGO, the FAO and a Kenyan company and research institute have mobilized efforts to control the undesirable spread of the Prosopis tree by promoting its commercial use as charcoal, timber and pods for livestock feed. The development of a sustainable national market will maximize returns to local communities.

Rwanda:
"Production and Distribution of Pressurized Biogas in Gas Cylinders". This initiative has been developed by a private company, an international NGO and government organizations to produce and store pressurised biogas for cooking made from urban, domestic and industrial wastes. Environmental benefits are achieved by offering an alternative firing material to firewood and charcoal.

"Efficient Charcoal Production and Smoke Recycling". This partnership of international NGOs, government institutions and a reforestation initiative is promoting new technologies to increase the energy output of charcoal. As a result, this significantly reduces the amount of forestland used for the production of charcoal and lessens air pollution by recycling tar and other smoke components.

**Senegal:**

- "Micro Power Economy for Rural Electrification". The goal of this enterprise involving local partners from the private and microfinance sector is to set up a profitable rural power provider based on off-grid power system operation and the utilisation of renewable energy sources, such as wind-solar-diesel hybrid power systems.
- "FLOWER OF H.O.P.E" This pioneering franchising initiative set up by a community-based organisation, international NGOs and research and finance institutions aims to improve agricultural development by training resource-poor community groups to become successful agricultural entrepreneurs, thereby generating more income for local communities.
- "Kayor Rural Energy, Rural Electrification by Photovoltaic Solar Energy". An outstanding pilot enterprise launched by a community-based organisation that aims to provide solar energy solutions for rural communities. The partnership with microfinance institutions permits KAYER clients to finance their equipment with microcredit adapted to their means.

**South Africa:**

- "Resentse Sinqobile Trust Trading as Zondi BuyBack Initiative". A local NGO and government institutions have teamed up to establish this comprehensive buyback centre to recycle, reshape and sell household waste such as cans and plastic. Natural resource protection, the reduction of litter, increased employment opportunities and an educational program are among the impressive results of this initiative.
- "IziWasha". Two social enterprises and a private company have developed this innovative handheld laundry device to facilitate washing in low-income communities. As the appliance does not rely on electricity or a home water supply, IziWasha significantly cuts water and energy use. A network of female micro-franchisees who distribute the eco-friendly product will directly benefit from the revenues.
- "Reclaiming Livelihoods ? Mooi River Waste Reclaiming". This initiative led by a community-based organization, an international NGO and a government department has a high impact on local waste pickers who earn an income from recycling waste. By formalising the workforce and providing shelter, protective clothes and technical equipment, attractive job opportunities are created.
- "Amatola Wild Trout Fishery" is the first recreational fly-fishery in South Africa owned and managed by a local community. Set up by a partnership between a NGO and a
research institution, the fishery brings a high-end market tourism activity into a rural area, while focusing on skills training and job creation for local people and environmental improvement by sustaining water quality and wild trout populations.

- "Food & Trees for Africa" is a social enterprise addressing the greening of urban areas, climate change and food insecurity by planting trees. Launched by a local and international NGO, government institutions and private businesses, FTFA offers skills training in natural resource management and develops organic permaculture gardens for impoverished communities. The project has also designed a carbon calculator.

- "Claire Reid Reel Gardening" provides consumers with a pre-fertilised seed strip that encases seeds at the correct depth and distance apart and offers planting instructions in seven languages. Implemented by a youth organization with assistance from government and social development programmes, the initiative aims to create sustainable subsistence gardens throughout South Africa.

Sri Lanka:

- The "Rural Enterprise Network (REN)" aims at linking small-scale farmers to input-output markets through improved product quality, access to market information and the establishment of a common brand. By organizing producers in a network of organic agro- and food processing enterprises, the farmers will benefit from joint marketing services.

Uganda:

- "ORIBAGS INNOVATIONS (U) LTD" is a private enterprise initiated by a research institution and local NGO to manufacture hand-made paper bags, printing paper and jewellery from agricultural wastes including wheat straw, elephant grass and other natural fibres. Oribags offers an eco-friendly alternative to polythene bags and empowers women entrepreneurs.

All of SEED's winners can be found on the SEED website at www.seedinit.org

SEED International Jury

The 2010 SEED Award winners were selected by the independent International Jury which very kindly dedicated considerable time to choosing the most promising of the applications. The members of the jury are:

Helmy Abouleish: Managing Director, SEKEM Group

Leila Akahloun: Integrator for Africa Programs, Ashoka

Prof. Walter Baets: Dean, University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business

Nancy Chege: National Coordinator Kenya, GEF Small Grants Programm

Elisea Gillera Gozun: former Minister of Environment in the Philippines
April 18, 2011

Bolivia Set to Pass Historic 'Law of Mother Earth' Which Will Grant Nature Equal Rights to Humans

By Keph Senett
PV Pulse

With the cooperation of politicians and grassroots organizations, Bolivia is set to pass the Law of Mother Earth which will grant nature the same rights and protections as humans. The piece of legislation, called la Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra, is intended to encourage a radical shift in conservation attitudes and actions, to enforce new control measures on industry, and to reduce environmental destruction.

The law redefines natural resources as blessings and confers the same rights to nature as to human beings, including: the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered. Perhaps the most controversial point is the right "to not be affected by mega-infrastructure and development projects that affect the balance of ecosystems and the local inhabitant communities".

In late 2005 Bolivia elected its first indigenous president, Evo Morales. Morales is an outspoken champion for environmental protection, petitioning for substantive change within his country and at the United Nations. Bolivia, one of South America's poorest countries, has long had to contend with the consequences of destructive industrial practices and climate change, but despite the best
efforts of Morales and members of his administration, their concerns have largely been ignored at the UN.

Just last year, in 2010, Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca expressed his distress "about the inadequacy of the greenhouse gas reduction commitments made by developed countries in the Copenhagen Accord." His remarks were punctuated by the claim that some experts forecasted a temperature increase "as high as four degrees above pre-industrial levels." "The situation is serious," Choquehuanca asserted. "An increase of temperature of more than one degree above pre-industrial levels would result in the disappearance of our glaciers in the Andes, and the flooding of various islands and coastal zones."

In 2009, directly following the resolution of the General Assembly to designate April 22 "International Mother Earth Day", Morales addressed the press, stating “If we want to safeguard mankind, then we need to safeguard the planet. That is the next major task of the United Nations”. A change to Bolivia’s constitution in the same year resulted in an overhaul of the legal system - a shift from which this new law has sprung.

The Law of Mother Earth has as its foundation several of the tenets of indigenous belief, including that human are equal to all other entities. "Our grandparents taught us that we belong to a big family of plants and animals. We believe that everything in the planet forms part of a big family," Choquehuanca said. "We indigenous people can contribute to solving the energy, climate, food and financial crises with our values." The legislation will give the government new legal powers to monitor and control industry in the country.

"Existing laws are not strong enough," said Undarico Pinto, leader of the 3.5m-strong Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (a group that helped draft the law). "It will make industry more transparent. It will allow people to regulate industry at national, regional and local levels."

Bolivia will be establishing a Ministry of Mother Earth, but beyond that there are few details about how the legislation will be implemented. What is clear is that Bolivia will have to balance these environmental imperatives against industries - like mining - that contribute to the country's GDP.

Bolivia's successes or failures with implementation may well inform the policies of countries around the world. "It's going to have huge resonance around the world," said Canadian activist Maude Barlow. "It's going to start first with these southern countries trying to protect their land and their people from exploitation, but I think it will be grabbed onto by communities in our countries, for example, fighting the tarsands in Alberta."

Ecuador has enshrined similar aims in its Constitution, and is among the countries that have already shown support for the Bolivian initiative. Other include Nicaragua, Venezuela, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Antigua and Barbuda.

National opposition to the law is not anticipated, as Morales' party - the Movement Towards Socialism - holds a majority in both houses of parliament. On April 20, two days before this
year's "International Mother Earth Day", Morales will table a draft treaty with the UN, kicking off the debate with the international community.
Read the entire document (in Spanish) here.

UPDATE (Dec. 14, 2011): Canada Withdraws from Kyoto, while Mexico Insists on Green Fund
Related story: Is Progress a Right?
Related story: Ecuadorians Win Judgement Against Chevron in Amazon Case, Company Refuses to Pay.
Update May 23, 2011: Turkey considering ecological approach to new constitution. Read more here.


April 18, 2011
EPA Launches Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Initiative/EPA’s coordination with White House effort will support environmental education and healthier families

EPA Press Release

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WASHINGTON -- Administrator Lisa P. Jackson today announced the formation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships (FBNP) initiative. This announcement reflects EPA’s commitment to the goals of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, a priority of President Obama’s. Strong relationships with faith and neighborhood organizations will help promote environmental stewardship that will lead to cleaner communities, encourage healthier families and build a stronger America. These relationships will also help EPA assist communities during times of environmental crisis.

“In the history of this nation, faith communities and neighborhood groups have been instrumental in efforts to open new opportunities and improve the world we live in. We are initiating today an effort to connect the talent, energy and enthusiasm we see in faith groups and communities across the nation with the work we are doing at EPA,” said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. “This is part of a broader effort, involving the White House and 12 other federal agencies, to form working relationships among government at all levels and faith-based and secular non-profit organizations to serve Americans in need and keep children and families healthy.”

On February 9, 2010, President Barack Obama signed executive order 13498 establishing the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and created an advisory
council, which is composed of 25 religious, secular leaders and scholars, and 12 federal faith-based and neighborhood partnerships centers to assess and strengthen partnerships between the U.S. government and community-serving organizations. EPA joined the partnership in October 2010.

Through this initiative, EPA will focus on four areas: establishing a center to work with faith-based and neighborhood groups to increase awareness of environmental issues in communities throughout the country, developing a national plan of action to foster strong relationships between faith and neighborhood organizations, building partnerships between those organizations and government, and developing a website that will house environmental education tool kits and resources.

EPA has pledged to work to expand the environmental conversation and continue the fight for environmental justice to relieve the burdens of pollution in poor and minority communities. In addition, EPA will work with participating institutions to bring green jobs to these communities, increase energy efficiency through EPA’s Energy Star for Congregations program, and improve environmental education and communications.

More information: [http://www.epa.gov/fbnpartnerships/](http://www.epa.gov/fbnpartnerships/)

[http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/bd4379a92ceec8525735900400c27/d49a036b7f10292f85257876007036de!OpenDocument](http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/bd4379a92ceec8525735900400c27/d49a036b7f10292f85257876007036de!OpenDocument)

April 21, 2011

Hindus Find a Ganges in Queens, to Park Rangers’ Dismay

By Sam Dolnick
New York Times

It was just after dawn last Sunday when a pair of pilgrims lighted incense on the shore and dropped two coconuts into the sacred waters, otherwise known as Jamaica Bay.

The shells bobbed in the surf, not far from clay bowls, rotting limes and waterlogged rags that had washed back ashore, flotsam from previous Hindu ceremonies to mark festivals, births, deaths and everything in between.

As the Hindu population has grown in Queens over the last decade, so too has the amount of ritual debris — clothing, statues, even cremation ashes — lining the banks of the bay in Gateway National Recreation Area.

“We call it the Ganges,” one pilgrim, Madan Padarat, said as he finished his prayers. “She takes away your sickness, your pain, your suffering.”
But to the park rangers who patrol the beach, the holy waters are a fragile habitat, the offerings are trash and the littered shores are a federal preserve that must be kept clean for picnickers, fishermen and kayakers. Unlike the Ganges, they say, the enclosed bay does not sweep the refuse away.

The result is a standoff between two camps that regard the site as sacrosanct for very different reasons, and have spent years in a quiet tug of war between ancient traditions and modern regulations. Strenuous diplomacy on both sides has helped, but only to a point.

“I can’t stop the people and say, ‘You can’t come to the water and make offerings,’ ” said Pandit Chunelall Narine, the priest at a thriving Ozone Park temple, Shri Trimurti Bhavan, who sometimes performs services by the bay. “We are at a dead end right now.”

On Friday, Earth Day, prominent Hindu leaders plan to join park rangers in a cleanup of the beach, close to Kennedy International Airport, as part of a longstanding “leave no trace” campaign. Park officials, wary of dictating matters of faith, have reached out to Hindu temples, gently encouraging members to pray at the waters but to leave nothing there for the gods. And many Hindus have obliged.

But as new immigrants arrive, unaware of the rules, and others refuse to change their ways, park rangers have intermittently forsaken good-cop sensitivity for bad-cop force: installing signs, closing the parking lot at night and threatening to hand out $75 fines, to little avail.

“It’s been a mounting problem for years,” said Kathy Krause, the supervisory park ranger. “The breakdown of these items is very, very harmful.”

It started with the coconuts.

John Zuzworsky, a former ranger, noticed dozens of them washing up in Jamaica Bay a decade ago, even though the nearest coconut trees were probably 1,200 miles away. Then he found flags, bamboo sticks, saris and coins.

After asking around and witnessing a few Hindu rituals, he learned that the items were religious offerings. Hindus must go to the shore and leave offerings to Mother Ganga, the goddess of the river, to show respect and ensure blessings in this life and the next. “The offering is not complete unless it’s finally put in the water,” Mr. Narine explained.

Mr. Zuzworsky saw an opening for discussion. “A lot of the Hindu traditions are based in respecting the earth, and we were a national park,” said the former ranger, who trained as a wildlife biologist but volunteered his services as a liaison to Hindus. “I thought there was a real connection.”
He visited dozens of Hindu temples to discuss the area’s fragile ecosystem — how saris could strangle the sea grass, flowers could choke the birds, and fruit could disrupt the food chain. Since Mr. Zuzworsky left the park in 2008, rangers have become even more creative in spreading the word, joining a panel of priests on a local television channel. Ms. Krause discussed litter before more than 1,000 Hindus at an outdoor reading of the Ramayana.

Cremated remains are a particularly touchy subject. The scattering of ashes in water is among Hinduism’s most sacred rituals, necessary for a successful transition to the next life. The practice has drawn concern from park officials; they issue special permits for spreading ashes on a case-by-case basis, but Hindu leaders acknowledge that some bereaved families do not wait for permission.

Most Hindus who visit the beach are immigrants from the Caribbean islands and Guyana who have settled in the Richmond Hill area of Queens. They are largely descendants of Indian workers sent to the Caribbean in the 19th century.

Dozens of Hindu temples fill the blocks surrounding Liberty Avenue, the backbone of the city’s Little Guyana, where fragrant roti shops flank colorful sari stores. Some congregations meet in tight basement quarters, and others in extravagantly decorated compounds, but all profess that important rituals must be conducted by the water.

While some go to the Rockaways or Ferry Point Park, the most popular spot is the beach near North Channel Bridge, as it used to be called. “I love the water, I revere the water, it is my mother,” Mr. Narine said, arms thrust toward foggy Jamaica Bay.

The waters there are not nearly as dirty as the Ganges, which is thick with factory runoff, untreated sewage and, of course, religious offerings. But some Hindu leaders have embraced the park rangers’ message that their offerings threaten the bay.

The beach was “really disgustingly filthy,” said Nagassar Ramgarib, a retired electrician and a leader at a Queens temple, Shiva Mandir. “I was deeply ashamed of what my culture, Hinduism, has contributed to.” He rallied several members of his temple to help clean up, and he began working with park officials.

Even family members disagree. Mr. Narine’s brother, Dhanpaul, a public school teacher, contends that Hindus must follow American laws and adapt their ancient customs. Some priests have suggested compromises, like dipping the coconuts in the water seven times, then taking them home to throw away.
“They should understand we are in a different country now,” said Pandit B. Rishi Misir, a Brooklyn priest who leads a Hindu group, USA Pandits’ Parishad. “Our scripture does mention that we should follow the country’s rules and regulations. But some people are very stubborn.”

Ricky Kanhai and his wife, Asha, both 28, visited the beach last Sunday to pray that they would soon have a child. Mr. Kanhai waded into the water and poured jugs of milk, dyed pink with turmeric, into the sea foam. From the shore, his mother-in-law, Lalita Prasad, waved a tray of fried treats toward the bay. Normally, Ms. Prasad would leave the pastries in the water for Mother Ganga. But because of the fines and the park rules, she packed them back into a plastic bag to take home.

“In your heart, you feel like your offering is not accepted,” she said. “But we have to obey the rules.”
April 22, 2011

Earth Day Trails

By Shannon Ongaro
The Bozone

Morning pours through the kitchen window as I settle onto the couch with some tea and the newspaper. I peruse current events and read about the latest conflicts in the Middle East, as well as battles closer to home. Some local politicians want to do away with the endangered species act, and the heavy haul controversy still rages in Missoula. Wearyed by such news, I meander through the pages until a small posting for an Earth Day celebration at the Emerson catches my attention. My thoughts return to the Earth. Could it be that division, oppression, war, and environmental degradation are symptoms of a greater dis-ease that stems from our disconnect from the Earth? If our connection to the Earth was stronger, would we have a stronger connection to each other? If we healed our connections to the Earth, could we then heal our connections with one another?

I pick up a brochure about a project I recently discovered being pulled together by Bozemanite Weston Pew. It directly addresses these issues and is also a beautiful emblem of the spirit of Earth Day. The project is called The Sacred Door Trail (SDT), a 165-mile interfaith pilgrimage trail located in western Montana, dedicated to spiritual unity, peace and our connection to Earth and each other. It is a compilation of pre-existing National Forest Service trails, which make up a loop around the Philipsburg valley, located two hours northwest of Bozeman and an hour-and-a-half south of Missoula. What is special about the trail is that it is a shared sacred path, shared by as many people, faiths and indigenous cultures that care to support such a vision. The trail serves to reconnect people back to our original church, our original temple Mother Earth. The trail will officially open in August, 2012.

The opening will involve three days of dedication ceremonies and blessings for the land offered by representatives of all different faiths and indigenous cultures. The purpose of the blessings will be to establish the land and trail as a shared sacred space. Current support for the project includes indigenous and faith-based leaders not only from Montana, but from around the world, as well as interfaith and environmental organizations that believe in such acts of unity. I recently heard a definition of a healthy societal culture as one that facilitates connection to self, Earth and each other. In a culture of consumerism and distraction, I would say we are moving further and further away from the connections the Sacred Door Trail will offer. Ultimately, the success of our species depends on the health of those connections.

So this Earth day as we gather as a community let us celebrate those connections and, in doing so, further our own resolve to do what we can in our lives to heal and strengthen those connections. The future health of our children, our communities and the Earth depends on us.
April 23, 2011

Save Yamuna Movement picking up momentum
By Jagat
Vrindavan Today

Mathura (VT): The demonstration and fast at the Jantar Mantar grounds in Delhi are quickly becoming quite a source of discomfort for the government.

The outcry of Brajbhumi’s devotees against the Yamuna’s condition has begun to reverberate around India. The government has been trying to defuse the movement by talking to its leaders at the Jantar Mantar grounds in Delhi, and yesterday some agreement was reached with regard to the release of more water into the Yamuna on a limited number of days per month. But this has not yet satisfied the activists, who come from both the devotional and agricultural communities.

The padayatra against the pollution of the Yamuna that began on March 1 from Allahabad at the sangam with the Ganga present a ten point list of demands to the government on April 13, but to little effect. This was followed by a fast to the death, with some 50 devotees and farmers participating.

On the instruction of Home Minister P. Chidambaram, the Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, and the Water Minister Salman Khurshid, and the Rural Development Minister Pradip Jain, as well as UP Congress secretary Rita Joshi Bahuguna were all sent to placate the demonstrators.

The government proposed a standing committee to investigate the Yamuna situation, with the obvious intention of getting the demonstrators to stop their hunger strike and leave Delhi. The demonstrators did stop their fast, but they have decided not to leave the Jantar Mantar grounds.

This has made the central government ministers uneasy, but they are unable to make any firm commitments due to pressure from the Haryana and Delhi governments, who are loathe to give up any of their portion of the Yamuna waters.

Meanwhile, back in the Braja area, the cry of “save the Yamuna” is taking on the allure of a mass movement, with more and more organizations taking an active role in publicly pressing the various levels of government to take action.
According to the organizer of the march on Delhi, Sant Jai Krishna Das Maharaj (Yadavji) and Bhanu Pratap Singh of the BKU (Bhanu), demonstrations for the Yamuna are now taking place in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bihar.

- In Mumbai’s Chowpatti district, ISKCON’s Radha Gopinath temple is organizing a demonstration on Sunday and inviting all lovers of Braj and Vrindavan to take part in the Save Yamuna campaign. “Can you hear Yamuna Devi calling for help!?” The organizers of the demonstration are Vishwa Swarup, director of the Bhaktivedanta Institute and Ranjit Bagle.
- Prior to this Dwarkesh Lal and Purushottam Lal Goswami of Amaravati in Maharashtra, accompanied by 142 other persons, will present a letter to President Pratibha Patel demanding that something be done about the Yamuna pollution.
- In Boxer, Bihar, MLA for the RJD party, Jadatananda has taken up the cause. In Bihar, approximately 2000 villages are holding daily “prabhat pheri” or morning street sankirtan processions. They are raising the cry of “save the Yamuna” as a part of their program.
- In Rajasthan, the Nathdwara Temple Board secretary Indra Kumar Rakesh has been bringing the Yamuna issue to life in Bharatpur, Dausa, Dhaulpur and other places.
- In Gujarat also, lovers of Braj are following Kishor Chand Goswami of Junagarh in a Save the Yamuna campaign.

Meanwhile, back in Mathura, most activists are happy that the government has made some response to the marchers in Delhi. But they are happy to remark that the movement, which previously had been limited to the Braj area alone has now started to spread outside the region.

Gopeshwar Nath Chaturvedi, who has been fighting courtcases for the cleansing of Yamuna pollution since 1999, expressed happiness that the government was finally starting to pay attention.

“But the High Court ruled many years ago that there should be a fairer partitioning of the water. Mathura is supposed to get 22% and Haryana 65%,” he said. “If that ruling had been followed, there would have been no need for any padayatra.”

Kalindi Sewa Sansthan organizer Gopalacharya also praised the marchers and said that pressure has been building not just on the Center but on the local administration also.

State director of the Tirtha Purohit Mahasangh Kantanath Chaturvedi said that thousands of people have flocked to the Save Yamuna movement, but the response from the Central Government has still been insufficient.

The Braj Environment Protection Society said that the assurances given by the government are disappointing. General secretary Ramdas Chaturvedi said that increasing the amount of water in the Yamuna does not put an end to the problems. He said that the society had put together a team of 50 scientists to put together a technical plan which will present its report to the government in June through the National River Conservation Plan.

Meanwhile, a large group of sadhus and sants is expected to meet to discuss action for the Yamuna under the leadership of the Vishwa Sanatan Dharma Rakshak Dal (World Sanatan...
Dharma Protection Party) on April 27 at Gandhi Park in Mathura. Vitthalesh Maharaj of the Gopal Peeth is directing the preparations.

Invited guests include Shankaracharya Madhavashram Maharaj, Ramdevananda Maharaj, Vidyananda Maharaj, Phuldol Dasji Maharaj, and goswamis from the Pushti Marg. It is hoped that the blessings of the sants will lend increased impetus to the movement and bring it to a successful end.


April 26, 2011

Building the Sacred Inside and Out: Green Architecture for Houses of Worship

By Carole Caplan
GreenFaith Fellow
Huffington Post

It was in early 2008 that my Jewish community moved back into our new spiritual home. Our old building had long suffered from poor design, flooding and roofing issues and from a heating/cooling system that worked only parts of the building at any given time. After much research and discussion, it had become clear that doing nothing would no longer be an option. Although we sincerely explored both renovation and moving, we soon realized that the best option for the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation would be to tear down and rebuild.

Sitting in the sanctuary today, with it's impressive ceiling overhead, you might not realize that only the bottom 7 feet of the room are being heated and cooled. And although the warm wooden cypress slats that line the walls will easily embrace you, you might not remember that they once lined mushroom houses in upstate New York. Similarly, the ceremonial doors that welcome you to the building remain impressive in size, but it might go unnoticed that they were fabricated from trees that were sadly removed from the property during our construction. In so many ways, it is precisely what you don't realize, what you might not remember and what is invisible to the eye that make our JRC building sacred. Stewardship has been woven into the fabric of our communal history and is now a foundation of our communal spiritual life.

I've been thinking a lot about sacred space lately, as Passover preparations one again urged me to ritually remove every crumb of bread from my house. This act of separating clean from unclean imbues a palpable sense of intention to a space that previously had none. Similarly, the secular ritual of spring cleaning separates my experience of Chicago's long winter from the possibilities of warmth and growth yet to come. In connecting to these ritual acts of separation, I find myself connected to a greater sense of order. I am reminded that in Hebrew the word for sacred is kadosh. Though most commonly translated as "holy," kadosh can also be translated as "to set apart, or make separate." Through these acts of separation, connecting with an order that is ordinarily forgotten and often unseen, I am somehow again made whole.
It was with study and discussion of Jewish values that JRC committed to set apart our building project from traditional building plans. Importantly, the process of building green allowed us to consider how our seemingly individual project might actually be connected to a greater whole.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has taught that kadosh perhaps best translates as "intense," and certainly the intensity of our commitment toward stewardship of the earth and her resources contributed significantly to the sacredness of our space. Energy and water saving technologies were matched with the heartfelt desire to bring our values to life. The quality of the indoor air was discussed alongside the design of how our prayer space would look and function. Decision after decision was considered regarding the impact the building would have on the natural environment outside of us, as well as the impact this built environment would have on those who would soon dwell within. Bringing ancient teachings to life, we had the chance to do in community what we might not be able to do in our own homes. We watched with wonder as our values and dreams took shape hand-in-hand. Being neither the wealthiest nor greenest of congregations, I still find it extraordinary that a small congregation in the southwest corner of a Chicago suburb could become the first LEED-Platinum house of worship in the world. Ours was a journey grounded in values-based decision-making, and we courageously took action to make those decisions more than simply words. We are proud that the creation of our sacred space was undertaken in a sacred manner and joyous that we have been able to share our story with others seeking to do the same.

When I enter the sanctuary to pray, the large windows reveal the trees outside as they weather the changing seasons. As I witness them from this sacred space, my connection to them is unavoidable. Sacred space should touch you in a way that leaves you transformed, and at JRC this is most certainly true. Touched, I seek to connect with those around me. Transformed, I seek to act. I have come to realize that sacred space lies not in what I can see and touch in our building itself, but resides instead where we find ourselves coming together with intention and called to look beyond ourselves to serve a greater whole.

May the prayers of all of our hearts join together with the work of all of our hands so that we might soon bring a lasting sustainability into being.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carole-caplan/sacred-both-inside-and-ou_b_853284.html

May 2, 2011

The Christian case for environmentalism

The confluence of Good Friday and Earth Day is a reminder of our duty to protect God's creation

By John R. Schol
The Baltimore Sun

The world's two billion Christians have just completed Holy Week, celebrating the final days, death and resurrection of Jesus. This year, the global celebration of Earth Day coincided with
Good Friday, giving many of us an additional perspective on this sacred and ancient commemoration.

Good Friday, marking Jesus' crucifixion, is a challenging day in many ways. The original Good Friday was a day of grief and confusion for Jesus' friends and followers. Today, Christian rituals reflect that grief, even though Jesus' sacrifice is central to the broader Easter story of salvation and hope.

Earth Day is also a mixture of hope and sadness. The environment continues to remind us of the consequences of the selfish and short-sighted actions we often take against God's creation. Air and water pollution, deforestation and many other reminders threaten our own well being and the well being of other animals' habitats and survival. But Earth Day is also a community celebration of our planetary home and our commitment to caring better for it.

In recent years, Christians from across the theological and political spectrum have begun to give more serious consideration to our collective impact on the gift of God's creation. A creation care movement has given a voice to many younger Christians who believe that responsible stewardship is about far more than simply exercising dominion over the earth and maximizing the exploitation of its resources. In The United Methodist Church, through our God's Renewed Creation project, many congregations and individual members are addressing a set of interrelated threats to creation: endemic poverty and disease, widespread environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence. This broadly ecumenical concern for creation is a cause for hope.

Unfortunately, there are other voices distorting the intentions and efforts of environmentally-minded Christians. Some religious leaders and political commentators have attacked the environmental movement, equating environmentalism with paganism and earth-worship. Others go even further, suggesting that the "Green Dragon" of environmentalism is actively anti-Christian, anathema to the Gospel of Christ. These criticisms will further delay collaborative efforts to care for creation and create greater risks for our fragile environment.

We also see these distortions of faith and reality reflected in the views and actions of too many elected officials, many of whom are in a dangerous state of denial about the scientific consensus on the threats posed by climate change. Some explain their opposition to changing our consumption habits as concern for the poor, who they say would be disproportionately hurt if new regulations resulted in higher energy prices. But the scientific consensus is overwhelming that it is precisely the world's most poor and vulnerable individuals and nations who will be most adversely affected by climate change and its impact on everything from agriculture to rising sea levels and regional resource-related conflicts.

The crucifixion and resurrection remind Christians of the full range of human possibility. We see fear and self-centeredness and betrayal, but also courage and self-sacrifice and redemption. We learn that God's grace allows us to overcome our despair and doubt. Indeed, our faith really begins after Easter, when the good news begins to spread and believers are challenged to take it to the far ends of the earth. Let us demonstrate our love for God, for creation, and for our fellow human beings by facing up to our huge and immensely complicated challenges and acting as if we believe that we are both recipients of God's grace and stewards of God's creation.
May 2, 2011

Lord Ganesha worshiped to open Nevada Earth Day Celebrations

Albuquerque Express

(ANI) - Nevada Earth Day 2011 celebrations here today opened with prayers from ancient Sanskrit scriptures and Baha'i prayer in Farsi.

After lighting incense before Lord Ganesha statue and sprinkling holy water from river Ganga, distinguished Hindu statesman Rajan Zed read Shanti Mantra in Sanskrit from the Earth Day stage, followed by "Prithvi Sukta" (hymn to earth) from Atharva-Veda, invoking the Goddess Earth.

Zed, who is President of Universal Society of Hinduism, also prayed from Bhagavad-Gita (Song of the Lord), where Lord Krishna is quoted as saying, "The brightness of the sun, which lights up the world, the brightness of the moon and of fire-these are my glory. With a drop of my energy I enter the earth and support all creatures. Through the moon, the vessel of life-giving fluid, I nourish all plants."

"We may believe in different religions, yet we share the same home-our Earth. We must learn to happily progress or miserably perish together. For man can live individually but can only survive collectively", Rajan Zed said quoting ancient Hindu scriptures.

Roya Galata, a Baha'i elder, recited the Baha'i prayer in Farsi after Zed. Jim Meiklejohn, Treasurer of Nevada EcoNet, the organizers of the Earth Day, thanked Zed and Galata for the prayers.

According to Kaitlin Weeks, Nevada EcoNet Executive Director, estimated 10,000 people attended Earth Day to celebrate our planet and raise environmental awareness; which included live entertainment, crafts, display booths by various non-profit and other organizations/agencies/businesses offering energy conserving and sustainable living products.
children's activities, vendors selling eco-friendly products, etc. Local food, science, technology, policy and the arts were interwoven throughout the event with many experts on hand to address questions and issues.

Jo Simpson and Megan Gibson are President and Secretary respectively of Nevada EcoNet, whose mission is "to raise environmental awareness". (ANI)


May 6, 2011

Oil spill in Lubicon Lake Cree Nation, Alberta: KAIROS urgent action

KAIROS Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

The largest oil spill in Alberta since 1975 has taken place on the doorstep of the Lubicon Cree community of Little Buffalo. Over 28,000 barrels of oil, or 5.2 million litres, have leaked from an ageing pipeline and are at severe risk of spreading throughout local waterways. Members of the Lubicon community are reporting illnesses as a result of the stench of oil in the air, and that the company involved is not providing clear information. In keeping with decades of solidarity with the Lubicon Cree band, which has never ceded its rights to its 10,000 square kilometre traditional territory, KAIROS is asking you to take action. The community is asking for your help in pressing the Alberta government and the company for clear and timely information.

TAKE ACTION:

Please ask that the Energy Resources Conservation Board of Alberta (ERCB) and Plains Midstream meet Lubicon needs now. The Lubicon Cree are asking that the following be done:

- The ERCB attend Lubicon community meetings to answer directly community members' questions

- An independent environmental assessment be completed as soon as possible and be reported directly to the community

- A Lubicon fly-over of the spill-affected area to survey immediate damage to the traditional territory

- A health response team be stationed in the Lubicon community, to immediately respond to those who continue to get sick from contamination, especially children
In your response, please note that other First Nations and communities in the area have not been informed of the spill.

Contact the ERCB as soon as possible via phone, fax, or email:

Dan McFadyen, Chairman

Energy Resources Conservation Board, Suite 1000, 250 - 5 Street SW, Calgary, Alberta. T2P 0R4

Chairman's phone: (403) 297-2215   FAX: (403) 297-7336


Please cc all letters to Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach:

Office of the Premier, Room 307, Legislature Building, 10800 - 97th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta. T5K 2B7

Fax: (780) 427 1349

And to KAIROS:

211 Bronson Ave., # 211, Ottawa, K1R 6H5

ebianchi[at]kairos canada[dot]org

More information:

Amnesty International (Canada) statement

Press release: Residents, including children, sick after large oil spill in the Peace Region

Globe and Mail article

KAIROS Lubicon Cree page

For more information on KAIROS’ long-standing work alongside the Lubicon Cree Nation, please contact Ed Bianchi, Indigenous Rights program coordinator, at ebianchi[at]kairos canada[dot]org or 613 235 9956 x221.
Further background:

For decades the Lubicon Cree have struggled for recognition of their land and treaty rights; to this day, they do not have a reserve. In the 1980’s they called on Canadians to help them stop clearcut logging in their traditional territory. In this century, that call focused on oil and gas companies, which have set up shop throughout the territory.

A recent Globe and Mail article on the oil spill observed that “Some 20 local people have been hired to help with the 24-hour a day cleanup operation, but the spill has brought into sharp focus some of the long-standing ills that afflict Little Buffalo. The community has no running water; instead, water is trucked in, and people hand-carry it into their houses from 45-gallon oil drums. With no plumbing, people rely on outhouses. Showers are available at the school, but many wash using sponge baths.”

The situation now facing the community is yet another expression of their decades-long struggle for recognition, and for a say in what happens in their traditional lands and waters. It’s also related to the overwhelming presence of the oil and gas industry in Alberta’s economy and its rural areas.

The provincial regulatory authority, the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB), approves far more energy projects each year than it inspects. Faced with a geometrically growing number of un-inspected projects and a growing backlog of project applications prompted by the high price of oil, the province opted for streamlining the regulatory process to approve projects faster.

The TransCanada Pipeline was approved by this streamlined process. The basic principle of environmental regulation in Alberta is self-regulation by the companies. The companies monitor themselves and are supposed to report to the province what they’re putting into the water and air. The amount of money the companies make is so large and the penalties for infractions so small that the gamble of ignoring the system is a small one.

The spill was caused by failure of a large oil pipeline built through Lubicon territory some 45 years ago to transport oil from oil fields north east of the territory to oil refineries near Edmonton. That was a dozen or more years before oil companies moved into Lubicon Territory en masse to exploit the gas and oil resources there. Media reports say provincial regulators last inspected this 45 year oil pipeline in 2009 using "an ultrasonic tool".

The spill occurred April 29 at 7:30 AM. Instead of attending a community meeting, the Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) faxed a one-page fact sheet to Little Buffalo School. The fact sheet indicates that tens of thousands of barrels of crude oil have spilled, stating that the spill is 30 kilometres from the Lubicon community of Little Buffalo Lake and 300
meters away from "any flowing water, and is pooling in a stagnant pond". By contrast, community members report that the spill is seven kilometres away from Little Buffalo, located in wetlands that connect the underground water system in the Lubicon area, and is only three kilometres away from Lubicon Lake.

The ERCB said the spill has been contained, but community members report that the oil is still leaking into the surrounding forest and bog. The ERCB also said to the community that there is "no threat to public safety as a result of the leak."

Yet classes have been suspended due to the noxious odours in the air. “The children and staff at the school were disoriented, getting headaches and feeling sick to their stomachs," said Brian Alexander, the principle of Little Buffalo School. "We tried to send the children outside to get fresh air as it seemed worse in the school but when we sent them out they were getting sick as well."

Provincial officials deny these illnesses are related to the spill. Davis Sheremata, spokesman for Alberta's Energy Resources Conservation Board, denied that problems in Little Buffalo were connected to the leak, saying "We often will get complaints like this and sometimes it is a feedlot nearby. Sometimes it's an asphalt operation. Sometimes it's not oil-and-gas related. We're looking into it." Yet people who have lived in the community state there is no feedlot or asphalt operation anywhere in the area.

"The company and the ERCB have given us little information in the past five days. What we do know is that the health of our community is at stake," said Chief Steve Nosky. "Our children cannot attend school until there is a resolution. The ERCB is not being accountable to our community; they did not even show up to our community meeting to inform us of the unsettling situation we are dealing with. The company is failing to provide sufficient information to us so we can ensure that the health and safety of our community is protected."


May 6, 2011
Vatican Issues Major Report on Science of Climate Change

Catholic Climate Covenant

Yesterday, a working group of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, one of the oldest scientific institutes in the world, issued a sobering report on the impacts for humankind as a result of the global retreat of mountain glaciers as a result of human activity leading to climate change.

In their declaration, the working group calls, “on all people and nations to recognize the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other land uses.” They echoed Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 World Day of Peace Message saying, “…if we want justice and peace, we must protect the habitat that sustains us.”

Veerabhadran Ramanathan of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego—a member of the Pontifical Academy since 2004 and a co-chair of the working group said to ClimateWire, “I have never participated in any report in 30 years where the word 'God' is mentioned. I think the Vatican brings that moral authority."

The report focuses on the impact of anthropogenic climate change on mountain glaciers and warns that, “Failure to mitigate climate change will violate our duty to the vulnerable of the Earth, including those dependent on the water supply of mountain glaciers, and those facing rising sea level and stronger storm surges. Our duty includes the duty to help vulnerable communities adapt to changes that cannot be mitigated. All nations must ensure that their actions are strong enough and prompt enough to address the increasing impacts and growing risk of climate change and to avoid catastrophic irreversible consequences.” (Emphasis added.)

The working group recommends three measures to reduce the threat of climate change and its impacts:

1. “Reduce worldwide carbon dioxide emissions without delay,” using all means possible to meet ambitious international global warming targets and ensure the long-term stability of the climate system. All nations must focus on a rapid transition to renewable energy sources and other strategies to reduce CO2 emissions. Nations should also avoid removal of carbon sinks by stopping deforestation, and should strengthen carbon sinks by reforestation of degraded lands. They also need to develop and deploy technologies that draw down excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These actions must be accomplished within a few decades.

2. “Reduce the concentrations of warming air pollutants (dark soot, methane, lower atmosphere ozone, and hydrofluorocarbons) by as much as 50%, to slow down climate change during this century while preventing millions of premature deaths from respiratory disease and millions of tons of crop damages every year.

3. “Prepare to adapt to the climatic changes,” both chronic and abrupt, that society will be unable to mitigate. In particular, we call for a global capacity building initiative to assess the natural and social impacts of climate change in mountain systems and related watersheds.”

You are strongly encouraged to read the entire report which we have posted on the Catholic Climate Covenant website.
Monks Fight to Get Cambodian Forests on the Carbon Market

By Brendan Brady / Sorng Rukavorn
Time Magazine

For years, the guardians of Sorng Rukavorn forest have drifted through the muted greens and grays of the underbrush in their saffron robes. In the far north of Cambodia, the monks live in what should be peaceful isolation, but all too often they have had to fend off incursions on this land. Using their authority as holy figures, they’ve turned away illegal loggers — among them, they say, armed police and soldiers — as well as local officials who have tried to wrestle control of the public land to parcel it out for their own profit.

Now the monks are looking for backup. They plan to institutionalize their communal ownership of the forest and shared profit from its 44,479-acre (18,000 hectare) bounty by demarcating it an international ecological asset. Sorng Rukavorn is one of 13 community forests spreading over 168,032 acres (68,000 hectares) in Oddar Meanchey province that is being registered as a bank of carbon credits. Under this nascent international tool of climate-change mitigation referred to as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), governments and companies in industrialized nations can pay developing countries to cut carbon emissions on their behalf by not cutting trees. Deforestation accounts for roughly a quarter of greenhouse-gas emissions from human activity, according to the U.N. Trees and plants absorb the gas — produced by a number of natural and man-made processes, from the combustion of fossil fuels by factories, cars and volcanic eruptions to the flatulence of livestock — and are therefore essential to balancing its levels in the atmosphere. (See more about REDD.)

Though the science of climate change is mostly new to the monks of Sorng Rukavorn, the importance of preserving nature is fundamental. Forests have always figured prominently in the imagination of Buddhists. "It was under a tree that Buddha was born, meditated, achieved enlightenment and passed away," says Tha Soun, a 42-year-old monk who has modeled his lifestyle after his deity, spending much of his time in ritualized performances under Rukavorn's canopy. Tha recalls times several years ago when Sorng Rukavorn would receive regular visits from police and soldiers who were engaged in illegal-logging racket. "We have had success in protecting this land because we are monks," says Tha, adding that lay Cambodians are much more vulnerable to harsh retaliation for confronting authorities. "If they wouldn't stop, I would just take their chain saws and weapons."
Most of Cambodia's forests have not been quite so blessed. Cambodia's forest cover has declined 22% over the past two decades, according to the U.N. The destruction would have been much worse if the government hadn't canceled most logging concessions at the turn of the century. At one point during the 1990s, nearly 40% of Cambodia's total land mass was signed over to loggers, according to the London-based NGO Global Witness, which the government banned from working in Cambodia after it published a detailed report in 2007 linking high-ranking politicians as well as members of the military and business community with illegal logging. The government has vehemently denied that report's findings, but its commitment to maintain protected areas continues to be called into question. The English-language newspaper the Cambodia Daily recently reported that from Feb. 1 to April 1, Prime Minister Hun Sen approved 17 concessions granting agribusinesses rights to exploit some 424 sq. mi. (1,100 sq km) in 10 protected areas across the country.

For the residents of Somraong district in Oddar Meanchey, the illicit auction of public resources has left them ever shrinking space to take their livestock to graze and harvest forest products, including fruit, honey and traditional medicine. As that has happened around the country, the value of a forest like Sorng Rukavorn, which is accessible to all, has become clearer, says Choun Chun, a resident who volunteers for a village committee that, in cooperation with the monks, oversees the forest. "If we cut down the trees, there will be nothing for the next generation, and we will have ruined ourselves."

Much devastation has been visited upon the area already. Oddar Meanchey became a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge after a Vietnamese invasion ousted the fanatical revolutionaries in 1979. Khmer Rouge leaders and their depleted militia held out here against the new regime until the late '90s, funding their campaign by selling timber to dealers in neighboring Thailand. The area has since opened up to the outside world but remains depressed, with poor infrastructure and few economic opportunities. Pact, the NGO that has facilitated the carbon credit application process for the province's community forests, says the revenues will fund development initiatives, including the building of roads, schools and hospitals, and support local employment. (See pictures of the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge.)

Leslie Durschinger, managing director of Terra Global Capital, the San Francisco–based company that is marketing Oddar Meanchey's carbon assets, anticipates that the forests could garner as much as $50 million over the course of 30 years (the typical duration of a REDD contract). First, however, Oddar Meanchey's carbon assets must be jointly validated by the Verified Carbon Standard and the Climate Community and Biodiversity Standard, both third-party carbon auditors, as well as attract a buyer. For now, the revenue remains tentative: clean technologies, renewable energy and technology transfers earn credit as offsets in legislated carbon markets, but REDD has yet to gain official currency.

The European Union Emission Trading System — which, with tens of billions of dollars in annual trade, is the largest mandatory carbon market — has placed a moratorium on considering
REDD credits until 2020. The fledgling California Compliance Market, one of a handful of American state bodies to regulate carbon emissions in the absence of federal laws on the matter, is the only public compliance body in the world that has committed to accepting REDD credits. The U.N.'s proposed international REDD system was outlined in Cancún last December during an annual climate-change summit, but disagreements about how it should be funded prevented the mechanism from being implemented. Member states will meet again in December, in Durban, South Africa, to try to push through a binding REDD program.

Critics of REDD argue that forest fires and illegal loggers make avoided deforestation credits an easy bank to rob. "We've had so many credibility questions with the carbon market [in general] ... so something like REDD needs time to get off the ground before it should be included" in carbon compliance markets, says Sanjeev Kumar, a climate and energy policy specialist based in Brussels for E3G, a sustainable development nonprofit group. There are also significant and legitimate concerns about the allocation of REDD revenue in a country like Cambodia, which Transparency International routinely ranks among the most corrupt governments in the world. Cambodia, like many countries, requires that revenue earned from state land be funneled through the government.

For now, Oddar Meanchey's carbon credits will be offered on a voluntary market driven by governments and companies that buy offsets to establish themselves as ecologically conscious or anticipating future compliance requirements. Vann Sophanna, a high-ranking official in the government's Forestry Administration, says state-sanctioned REDD contracts for the forests will empower residents to confront loggers by putting the full weight of the state's authority on their side. "Villagers can have those who try to destroy the forest — even if they are police, soldiers or forestry administration officials — arrested," he says. "We will enforce the law." But it's precisely the role of the government that leaves residents in doubt. "The money might go to the people, or it might go to corrupt officials," said 58-year-old Kuy Thourn, a village leader. "We will find out."

http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2070384,00.html

May 9, 2011

Vatican working group calls for concrete steps to combat climate change

By Carol Glatz
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Nations and individuals have a duty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enact policies that mitigate global warming, said a Vatican-sponsored working
"The business-as-usual mode will not be possible because of both resource depletion and environmental damages," the group said in a report released by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences May 2.

The cost of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing reforestation, cutting air pollutants and helping poor regions adapt to climate change "pales in comparison to the price the world will pay if we fail to act now," it said.

"We call on all people and nations to recognize the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other land uses," it said.

The 15-page report on the impact human beings have on the environment was titled, "Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene," and was compiled and signed by 23 internationally renowned scientists, mountaineers, and lawyers. The academy's chancellor, Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, was also a signatory of the working group report.

The academy selected participants for the April 2-4 workshop at the Vatican to discuss the phenomena of melting mountain glaciers and to draw up recommendations in response to the risks and threats of climate change.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said in a written statement that while the report reflects the findings of the authors and is not "an act of the magisterium of the church," it is still "a significant scientific contribution to be valued in the context of the concerns about environmental problems often shown in recent magisterial documents and in the words of the Holy Father."

Pope Benedict XVI has been very vocal about his concern for environmental degradation and has criticized a lack of real commitment to mitigating climate change.

Father Lombardi said the group of glaciologists, climatologists, meteorologists, hydrologists, physicists, chemists and others represented "an extremely qualified working group" that issued "an important statement."

The report summarized recent findings of the effects climate change has and will have on world populations. It said diminished air quality due to particulates, soot and gases "result in more than 2 million premature deaths worldwide every year and threaten water and food security."

Melting glaciers put drinking water security at risk and climate disruptions threaten those living
in coastal and storm-prone areas, it said.

"The concentration of carbon dioxide in the air now exceeds the highest levels of the last 800,000 years," it said, adding that the gases and pollutants pumped into the atmosphere are to a large extent "man-made."

That human activity could so drastically alter current and future climate conditions, the report said, warrants assigning a new name to the current geological period -- anthropocene -- a term coined by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, Paul Crutzen, who was one of the working group's co-chairs.

The working group made the following recommendations:

-- Immediately reduce carbon dioxide emissions worldwide by employing renewable energy sources, halting deforestation, increasing reforestation and deploying technologies that "draw down excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

-- Cut heat-absorbing pollutants like soot, methane and hydrofluorocarbons by 50 percent.

-- Help countries assess and adapt to the environmental and social impacts climate change will bring.

"The group's consensus statement is a warning to humanity and a call for fast action -- to mitigate global and regional warming, to protect mountain glaciers and other vulnerable ecosystems, to assess national and local climate risks, and to prepare to adapt to those climate impacts that cannot be mitigated," the report said.

The working group also said another major threat that humanity poses to the world's climate is "the threat of nuclear war, which can be lessened by rapid and large reductions in global nuclear arsenals."

http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1101834.htm

May 10, 2011

Vatican Report Shines Light on Climate Change Divisions Within the U.S. Faith Community

By Jean Chemnick
New York Times
When the Vatican released a report last week calling man-made climate change "serious and potentially irreversible" and advocating aggressive action to curb emissions, it stirred up old divisions within the U.S. faith community over whether human activity can affect creation and what should be done about it.

It is a question that divides people of the same religion and denomination.

Some, like the interfaith members of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care who visited Capitol Hill last week to lobby for climate change legislation, believe that man-made greenhouse gases are an example of human activity threatening creation and unjustly subjecting the Earth's most vulnerable populations to climate-related privation and violence.

Others -- often from relatively similar religious backgrounds -- point to scripture as the basis for their belief that only God can cause a destructive change in climate and that the poor are more likely to suffer from expensive energy than from weather disasters.

The Rev. Mitchell Hescox, president of the Evangelical Environmental Network, is firmly in the first camp. He said last week that he expects Christians in particular to play a key role in eventually persuading lawmakers, especially Republicans, to support curbs on emissions.

Hescox said the religious community was already making inroads on the issue when the economy tanked in 2008 and would do so again when the economy is fully recovered.

"I think the fear over job loss has sort of trumped the issue of climate change for a short time," he said.

While acknowledging that evangelical Christians are far from unanimous in viewing climate change as a threat, Hescox predicted that would change. He noted that evangelical Christian attitudes toward the AIDS epidemic evolved radically from a decade ago, when the disease was viewed by conservative Christians as part of the homosexual lifestyle, to today's view that it is a pandemic that affects people from all walks of life.

"I think that's the educational place we are in now" on climate, he said. "This isn't just a sound bite, this isn't limited to one people, this isn't just the former vice president talking about an inconvenient truth, this is something that affects hundreds of thousands of lives each year right now and is going to put tremendous strains on the developing world."

Hescox said Christian concern about man-made climate change would be awakened when it became clear that vulnerable populations would have to shoulder the worst effects. Like the Vatican report (ClimateWire, May 6), Hescox predicted that these would include famine, war, unrest and less access to water.

Richard Cizik, president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good and another supporter of curbs to climate emissions, said that one tool in convincing evangelicals and
Catholics to lobby for climate change -- and Christian politicians to listen to them -- is to encourage them to think about judgment day.

"The only strategy is to convince enough evangelicals and Catholics -- these two enormous constituencies in America -- that this is in their best interest -- the best interest of the country, of the planet, and importantly the best interest of themselves eternally," Cizik said. "Because we will be held accountable."

"I'm not shy," he said, describing meetings with pro-fossil fuels lawmakers when he called them out for putting "temporal" concerns like re-election ahead of the health of their souls.

Still, Cizik said too few evangelicals now share his view that climate mitigation is a moral and spiritual imperative, which makes his work more complicated.

"We're going to have to spend a whole lot more effort trying to energize grass-roots evangelicals and Republican lawmakers than frankly we've had the capacity to do in this small evangelical movement that we have going here, that hasn't proven up to the task thus far," he said.

**Climate science vs. 'omniscient designer'**

Meanwhile, many of the larger evangelical groups continue to believe that man-made climate change is not happening, or if it is happening that the results are modest.

This view is in part based on theology.

At a 2009 hearing of the Energy and Commerce Committee partly devoted to the religious community's views on climate change, Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.) quoted from Genesis.

"Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his has been evil from childhood," Shimkus said. "And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done."

The view that only God can usher in catastrophic climate change is counter to the idea of free will, Hescox said.

"You can only have it one way," Hescox said. "You can either have us being truly puppets, and God controls every one of our moves or who gives us complete free will, and then there are consequences to our actions."

But E. Calvin Beisner of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, another Christian group, said Hescox's argument misses the point.

"A biblical faith tells us that the Earth is the effect of an omniscient designer, and therefore we should not anticipate that it's going to be an extremely fragile system that can be knocked into catastrophe by miniscule changes in that system," he said.
The post-Industrial Revolution increase in atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions is tiny, compared with pre-historic levels, he said.

Beisner said that while human emissions might have a small impact on global temperature, both his religious worldview and his understanding of the current state of science raised many doubts about a scenario under which human activity could create sweeping changes leading to famine and flood.

"It's not consistent with the understanding that Earth is the product of a wise creator's design to think that way," he said.

Beisner said he was primarily concerned with the welfare of poor people around the globe as well but that efforts to cut down on carbon-based fuels would actually hurt them by making energy less affordable and available.

"We actually do more harm by attempting to fight global warming -- to mitigate it -- than we do by continuing to use the most reliable and affordable energy sources," he said.

Some Catholics also disputed the validity of the Vatican report, which was conducted under the auspices of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the scientific arm at the Catholic church headquarters.

"This is not a scientific report, it's an advocacy piece," said Donna Bethell, an undersecretary of Energy during the George H.W. Bush administration who now serves on the board of Christendom College, a Catholic college in Virginia.

Bethell said the Vatican is right to support scientific research but said the report offered no new scientific findings. Furthermore, she disagreed with the report's assertion that the environmental and health consequences of climate change would be felt primarily by "those 'bottom 3 billion' people who are too poor to avail of the protections made possible by fossil fuel use and industrialization."

But Bethell agreed with Beisner that poorer parts of the world would suffer most from actions aimed at limiting fossil-fuels consumption, because it would inhibit their economic growth. She recalled making that argument in the late 1980s, when DOE and other federal agencies began to discuss ways to mitigate the causes of climate change at home and abroad.

"What you are proposing is just flatly immoral," she said. "You are telling a third of the world that the pie is empty -- there isn't anything for them."

Christians are not the only ones who feel called by their faith to take a position on climate change, or to push lawmakers to act on that position.
The National Religious Coalition on Creation Care, which Thursday offered U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson an award for her agency's work in regulating heat-trapping emissions, includes Muslims, Jews, Protestants and Catholics among its members.

Sybil Sanchez, director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, said environmental stewardship fits naturally into the Jewish faith, with its strong emphasis on interconnectedness and community.

"Civic engagement is embedded within Jewish life and with it the awareness of one's own actions and one's own responsibilities, also embedded within Jewish life," Sanchez said.

Sanchez added that beyond concerns about climate change, many Jews are interested in reducing petroleum consumption, because the international oil market helps to prop up repressive and often unfriendly governments in the Middle East.

"It's about Israel, but it's also about the national security of the United States, it's also about not wanting to support dictators," she said. "It's all wrapped up together."


May 10, 2011

UN Announces Winners of Flagship Environment Award

United Nations Environment Programme

New York / Nairobi - Mexican President Felipe Calderon, global music legend Angélique Kidjo and adventurer Louis Palmer are among the five winners of the 2011 Champions of the Earth awards, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced on Tuesday.

They received their awards at a ceremony hosted by UNEP Goodwill Ambassador, Gisele Bündchen, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, along with fellow laureates green entrepreneur Zhang Yue and scientist and campaigner Dr. Olga Speranskaya.

From using green technology to cut air pollution in China, to tackling the impact of toxic chemicals in Eastern Europe or crossing the globe to fly the flag for solar power, this year's award winners are environmental champions whose daily work, leadership and advocacy represent green innovation in action.

The full list of the 2011 Champions of the Earth is as follows:

- Policy Leadership: President Felipe Calderon (Mexico) for commitment to lead international efforts to combat climate change
• Science and Innovation: Dr. Olga Speranskaya (Russia) for successfully mobilizing civil society in eliminating obsolete pesticides and toxic chemicals in the former Soviet region.
• Entrepreneurial Vision: BROAD Group / Mr. Zhang Yue (China) for business leadership on energy efficiency and sustainable production.
• Inspiration and Action: Mr. Louis Palmer (Switzerland) for raising global awareness of the need for renewable energy and sustainable transport and Ms. Angélique Kidjo (Benin) for advocacy on social equity and women empowerment in support of sustainable development

"The 2011 Champions of the Earth winners are inspirational examples of how people from all walks of life are coming up with exciting, innovative solutions to environmental challenges. Whether through their business ventures, leadership, campaigning efforts or passion for technology, they are real examples of the global transition towards a more sustainable Green Economy", said UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner.

"As the world prepares for the UN Sustainable Development Conference in Rio de Janeiro next year, these five Champions of the Earth demonstrate how collective, positive action - from greener cars and air conditioning to tackling harmful pesticides or advocating for global action on carbon - can help tackle climate change and deliver environmental sustainability for communities and economies in all parts of the world", added Mr. Steiner.

The award ceremony followed a high-level policy dialogue, Getting to Grips with the Green Economy.

Featuring UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, Executive Coordinator of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), Elizabeth Thompson and Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico, Rafael Elvira Quesada, the event was an in-depth debate on the progress and challenges towards the global transition to a low-carbon, resource efficient Green Economy.

Moderated by TIME Magazine senior reporter Bryan Walsh, the interactive session explored different visions of the Green Economy in the developed and developing countries, the role of a Green Economy in eradicating poverty and how to calculate the cost of a transition towards a more sustainable global economic model.

The Champions of the Earth event ran parallel to the 19th session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development at UN headquarters in New York. The Green Economy ? along with international environmental governance reform is one of two central pillars of the UN Sustainable Development Conference (Rio+20), to be held in Brazil next year.

Launched in 2005, Champions of the Earth is the UN's flagship environmental award. To date, it has recognised 46 individuals and organizations for their leadership, vision, inspiration and action on the environment.

The diverse list of previous Champions laureates include former US Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore, Chinese actress and environmental advocate Zhou Xun, the
Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO) and Dr. Atiq Rahman, an author and sustainable development expert from Bangladesh.

2011 Champions of the Earth Winners Profiles:

President Felipe Calderon (Mexico)

President Calderon has been a strong voice for the environment on the world stage since his election in 2006.

He has been praised for his stewardship of international climate change negotiations - most recently as host of the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun, Mexico, last year. The Cancun talks resulted in several new initiatives and institutions, including the strengthening of the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanisms and the creation of a Green Climate Fund, which will manage long-term finance mobilized to enable developing countries to address climate change.

"Confidence is back", announced Calderon at the 3am conclusion of the climate talks, symbolising what was widely hailed as a significant step forward in climate negotiations after the disappointment of the Copenhagen conference in 2009.

Closer to home, President Calderon has made clear his ambition to make Mexico a world leader on climate action.

Under its Special Climate Change Program, Mexico will replace nearly 2 million refrigerators and air conditioners, and more than 47 million incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent lamps or other more efficient lighting technologies, by 2012.

Mexico made the unilateral commitment through its Special Climate Change Program (PECC) to reduce 51 million tons of CO2 by 2012 - the equivalent of all the GHG emissions generated by all the vehicles that circulate in Mexico City in four and a half years.

Mexico has also been a strong advocate of using forest resources to mitigate climate change. At present, the conservation of 2.4 million hectares of forest ecosystems incorporated in the Payment for Environmental Services Program is guaranteed. The Special Climate Change Program mitigation goal of incorporating 1.5 million hectares to the Payment for Environmental Services program, and thus preventing the release of 2.2 million tons of CO2 or its equivalent into the atmosphere, has already been achieved.

Reforestation programmes in the country are set to add another three million hectares by 2012.

"If we can find a formula that allows us to simultaneously fight climate change and poverty, we will have cleared the path to be followed by humankind", said President Calderón at the Champions of the Earth ceremony in New York. "That route exists and we must explore it together."

Dr. Olga Speranskaya (Russia)
Russian scientist Dr. Olga Speranskaya has been garnering headlines worldwide for her work to reduce the harmful impact of toxic chemicals in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Many former Soviet countries are home to vast stockpiles of highly toxic obsolete pesticides. Exposure to such pollutants can seriously damage human health and the environment.

Dr. Speranskaya formed a civil society network that has grown to include NGO groups, governmental bodies and academics. Its aim is to work on phasing out obsolete pesticides and other chemicals. The campaign succeeded in pushing national governments to ratify the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, which aims to eliminate the release of such products into the environment. Nine of twelve countries in the region ratified the Convention and now participate as full Parties at its global meetings. She has also led campaigns to ban the burial and transport of hazardous chemicals.

As co-chair of the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN), Dr. Speranskaya has helped NGOs implement more than 70 projects on toxic chemicals in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The NGOs have identified contaminated hotspots, analyzed the health impacts of POPs, developed proposals for mitigating these poisonous chemicals, and coordinated public participation in the identification of unauthorized storage and use of banned and obsolete chemicals.

"It feels great to be recognized by UNEP as a Champion of the Earth", said Dr. Speranskaya. "It demonstrates how important the work that we do is and how people all over the world really recognize that chemical safety is a great challenge and one of the major problems that we now face."

**BROAD Group (China)**

Zhang Yue Chairman and Founder

"Responsibility is more important than growth", runs one of the company mottos of China's BROAD Group.

BROAD is a world leader in the manufacture of central air-conditioning systems that use diesel or natural gas instead of electricity to cool office buildings, shopping malls and factories. BROAD states that its non-electric air conditioning units are 200% more energy efficient and that CO2 emissions are four times lower than traditional models.

BROAD, which is based in Changsha, Hunan Province, was established by Zhang Yue with a mere US$3,000 in 1988. Today, the company's air conditioners are the market leader in China and BROAD exports its products to some 60 countries around the world.

As well as regularly featuring in lists of China's wealthiest people, founder Zhang Yue has become one of the most outspoken voices on the environment in China, advocating, among other things, for tighter government regulations on insulation and building standards.
BROAD prides itself on its green credentials and lists protecting the environment, energy conservation and reducing greenhouse gases among its key company goals.

Indeed, BROAD states that the cumulative effect of all its products sold to date has led to emissions savings of around 90 million tons of CO2, 1 million tons of sulphur dioxide and 10,000 tons of CFCs.

BROAD has been a member of the United Nations Global Compact since 2001, and in 2008, the company joined the Climate Group - an independent, not-for-profit organization working internationally with government and business leaders to advance smart policies and technologies to cut global emissions and accelerate a clean industrial revolution.

"When I set up my business, I challenged myself to create wealth. Now, I have completely shifted the focus of this business towards the direction of reducing emissions. I've taken on the challenge of climate change", said Zhang Yue.

"With this award, people will start to notice our work and we will be able to influence them to pay more attention to energy efficiency, whether as an individual or as a business."

**Louis Palmer (Switzerland)**

Providing a green twist on Jules Vernes' famous voyage, adventurer Louis Palmer successfully led a fleet of electric vehicles around the world in 80 days last year. In doing so, the "Zero Race" highlighted two of the major environmental challenges facing the world today - the need for more sustainable transport and cleaner energy supplies.

Teams from Australia, Germany, Switzerland and South Korea took part in the race, which followed a course across four continents, before ending at the United Nations in Geneva last January. With their sleek, modern design and high performance, the Zero Race vehicles embody the major advancements currently underway in the transport sector and how investment in green technology is a key component of tackling climate change.

The Zero Race is only the latest chapter in Palmer's adventurous career. In 2004, with the help of four Swiss universities, he built the 'Solartaxi' and became the first person to circumnavigate the globe in a solar-powered vehicle. Traveling through 38 countries, Palmer reached an audience of millions with his solar showcase for efficient, sustainable transportation.

Palmer's work continues to deliver a simple, powerful environmental message across the world: that modern solutions to global warming are available, affordable and ready.

"I feel absolutely great to be recognized as a UNEP Champion of the Earth", said Louis Palmer. "So many people helped me and along the way and we all feel honored that we get this recognition. This change to renewable energies has to happen and really it motivates not only me but my whole team."

**Angélique Kidjo (Benin)**
A voice loved by thousands of fans around the world, singer-songwriter Angélique Kidjo is also a powerful voice for humanitarian and environmental change. Described by Time Magazine as "Africa's premier diva", Benin-born Kidjo uses her celebrity status to speak out in support of a number of important causes, particularly girls' education and sustainable development.

Kidjo established The Batonga Foundation in 2009, which provides scholarships, school supplies and mentoring programmes and raises community awareness of the value of education for girls in Africa.

Kidjo was raised in both the voodoo tradition and Catholic faith, and speaks of how her childhood taught her respect for nature. As part of her advocacy work on the environment and sustainable development, Kidjo recorded a video for UNEP's 'Seal the Deal' campaign, encouraging world leaders to produce a binding agreement on cutting carbon emissions and tackling climate change.

In 2010, Kidjo was appointed as a Patron for the UN Music & Environment Initiative. Led by the UNEP in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other partners, the initiative aims to leverage the power of music to address some of the most pressing environmental problems facing the planet.

"Any time I can spare from my family, my music, to go around the world and work with different kinds of people, that are struggling everyday to make their lives better and other peoples better, I will do so, because otherwise why am I here?" said Kidjo.

"My life will be useless, if I do not share my talent, my skill and my spirit. I'm not made to live alone, I'm made to live with other people on this planet."

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May 11, 2011

Four Biblical Voices on our Relationship to Creation

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Huffington Post
When people quote the Hebrew Bible, they often do so as if it were a single book with a single voice. But the Bible is not a book, it is a library. It has many books, written at different times by different individuals or groups with often very different ideas about God, humanity and the world. Even within some books like the book of Genesis, modern biblical scholarship has shown that there are multiple sources edited together. And within the Bible, a later source occasionally comments directly or indirectly on an earlier source, a technique scholars call intertextuality.

A case in point: Genesis 1:26-28 is often quoted to show that the "Bible" condones environmental exploitation by humanity because God creates humanity in God's image and then commands them to "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth." Taken out of context, it appears that humanity has been given free rein over Creation, but that interpretation fails to understand that being created "in the image of God" does not mean that humans have the right to be God. As my teacher in ethics, the late Rabbi Seymour Siegel said, we are to imitate God, not impersonate God. We are the agents of God's power on earth and that power is only granted us by the grace of God, a power which is limited and carefully bounded by accountability. This is shown in the very next verses in which humans are only allowed to eat a vegetarian diet. Permission to eat meat is given only after the Flood. In addition to the original context, it is always important to see how a religious tradition later interpreted its sacred texts as the original meaning may have been understood very differently in later generations. And in the case of Genesis 1:26-28, the later Jewish and Christian traditions never interpreted these verses to refer to unqualified human permission to exploit Creation.

There are, in fact, at least four different models in the Hebrew Bible about the human relationship to Creation. Each voice comes from a different source and each one still has something to teach us today. I have called these four models: the Caretaker, the Farmer, the Citizen and the Creature.

The Caretaker

Genesis Chapter 1 is part of what modern biblical scholars call the Priestly or P source, which was probably written by priests from the Temple in Jerusalem and received its final form in the fifth century B.C.E., although many P texts in the Torah were originally written several centuries before that. This particular biblical voice sees humanity as the caretakers or stewards of Creation on behalf of God. They believed that Creation was "very good" in the sense of being harmoniously ordered at the beginning and it was only humanity who could maintain or destroy that order.

The Caretaker model is also expressed in Psalm 8 which is a poetic meditation on the reality of the power that humans have over the rest of God's creatures. But it is also about humility and responsibility. The author of the psalm was standing outside at night looking at the millions of visible stars (which were celestial creatures in his cosmology) and wondering why God even notices humanity at all. The psalmist shows astonishment at the power of humans, which he characterizes as little less than the celestial creatures: Why should God have elevated such lowly creatures to such heights of power? The psalm expresses an underlying paradox that amazes the poet: the insignificance of humanity before the power and majesty of God, who has nonetheless granted humanity a divine-like control over the other creatures of the world. This power is
reflected in the fact that humans have the ability to catch, to kill and to eat all categories of animal life, both wild and domesticated, birds and fish. This psalm speaks of the reality of human power and how that power sets us apart from all other creatures. It is the recognition of the effect we have had on every part of this world. There is no place and no creature that has not felt the presence of human power and it is naive of us to think otherwise.

The Caretaker model recognized both human power and human responsibility. It speaks to us today because humanity does have real power in the unprecedented reach of our technology to affect the environment. We must acknowledge that with this power comes what the philosopher Hans Jonas called an "imperative of responsibility" since all life, not only human life, is threatened by our misuse of our knowledge and technological skill.

The Farmer

The second model is found in Genesis 2. In this source, (called by biblical scholars J after the use of the divine name YHVH which was originally transliterated as Jehovah and probably written in the 10th century B.C.E. in Judea), God forms a human (in Hebrew: adam) from the earth (Hebrew: adamah). One biblical scholar suggested that adam should really be translated as "earthling" to show the intimate connection between human beings and the earth from which they come and to which they are connected by the need to cultivate the ground in order to live. The ground will also be the place they return to when they die (Genesis 3:19).

God then plants a garden and places the human in it "to till it and tend it." The verbs have a root meaning of work and protect but the verb for "work" (l'ovdah) can also mean "to serve." Therefore, the earthling both works and serves the land as the source of all humanity's life-giving sustenance. This original balance of working, serving and protecting the earth is disturbed after the disobedience of the humans in the story of the eating of the fruit of knowledge in Genesis 3. Humans are now punished by having to toil hard in order for the earth to give forth its produce. What was once guaranteed is now contingent on human behavior. In this model, the land is not an inert substance but alive and morally sensitive to human action. This moral responsiveness is found in the story of Cain and Abel where God says to Cain that "your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" (See also Leviticus 18:28 where the land will "spew" the people out for acts of immorality.)

In many other texts in the Hebrew Bible, the places where humans dwell are akin to a garden: settled, ordered, peaceful places of plenty. Outside of human cultivation is the "wilderness" (Hebrew midbar). This term does not have the positive connotation that we now often give it. In the Hebrew Bible it is often depicted as a place of disorder, deserts, demons, wild dangerous beasts and migratory brigands. The Prophets often connect the continuance of human settled order to human righteousness and warn that the settled places will become "wilderness" if society continues to oppress the poor and the powerless.

We can learn several important messages from this model: first of all, our deep connection with the earth. Everything we eat and use ultimately comes from the earth. By eating the food grown in the earth we really are earthlings: the same substances that come from the earth make up our physical selves. So we really come from the earth and we will really go back to it when we die. Secondly, we can learn a kind of agrarian ideal: we have to live with the soil, not only exploit it.
We must not only work it but serve it and protect it. Thirdly, we must learn that economic and political oppression are linked to environmental degradation. This has been found to be true time and time again across the world and helps to create conflict and social unrest. If we want to keep our gardens fruitful and sustainable, they must also be just.

The Citizen

If the first two models of human/creation relationship are stewardship models which privilege human welfare, the third and fourth models are more biocentrist or, from a theological perspective, creation-centered. A creation-centered model is a holistic, more universal model. Creation theology sees the universe as a place where humans are part of an order in which they do not necessarily have a prime place. Humanity is, in this model, part of a Creation community in which they are, to use Aldo Leopold's terms, citizens and not conquerors. The first kind of this paradigm can be called the Citizen model of the human/natural world relationship and is the religious counterpart to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic.

Leopold's Land Ethic limits human power by tying humans to a larger ethical community that includes the whole biosphere. Leopold's impetus came from a sense of the tragic loss of biodiversity that he saw around him as a forester and conservationist. Leopold asserted that contemporary ethical theory is inadequate to protect the biosphere and must now be expanded to include non-human life and the landscape itself. He wrote:

"There is yet no ethic dealing with man's relationship to the land, to the animals and plants which grow upon it ... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants and animals or collectively the land. ... A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."

In this new ethical approach, something is right when it "preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

A biblical version of the Land Ethic is found in Psalm 148. The psalm is a creation hymn, a poetic map of the universe. It reflects the Israelite cosmology of a three-part universe: God, heavens and earth, or heavens, earth and Sheol (the underworld). The psalm's structure portrays Creation as divided between a heavenly choir and an earthly choir. The heavenly choir includes the sun, moon, planets and stars, whose role it is to praise God and to act as witnesses to a revelation of God. The earthly choir consists of the forces of the natural world, the landscape, animal life (both wild and domesticated) and all kinds of humans. They are copying the heavenly choir, uniting with them in the same role and singing the same song of praise to their Creator.

The universe reflected by Psalm 148 is a harmonious order in which humans have no primacy even if they have their own special place. They are part of the earthly choir and join in the activity of the heavenly choir in a unification of purpose. There is no dominant human power over the rest of Creation. Psalm 148 pictures human society as part of a community of
worshippers, which includes animal life, the forces of the natural world, such as the weather, the landscape and the heavens. The purpose of this community and therefore the purpose of all life is the praise of God.

Psalm 148 and Leopold's Land Ethic emphasis the interconnectedness of all life in one moral community. From the recognition of belonging to that community arises an ethical imperative. In Leopold, this interconnectedness is derived from the common evolutionary origins of all living creatures and their ecological interaction with the environment. In Psalm 148 the interconnectedness is derived from the common origins of all Creation from God. From this model, humanity must find a way to create a sustainable relationship with the whole choir of Creation.

**The Creature**

The final model is what I call the Creature model. From this perspective, humans have neither primacy nor even a special place in God's eyes. This is the most biocentrist and radical perspective in the Hebrew Bible and is found in only two sources, which stress humanity naiveté and arrogance.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes 3:17-21 the author says:

"So I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other and both have the same life breath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust."

According to most biblical scholars, the author is responding directly to Psalm 8 and its picture of humanity as little less than the celestial beings and being radically different than animals. Here humans and beasts are the same: they come from the earth, they live, they die and then they return to the earth. This is an example of the intertextuality that I mentioned earlier. The author is rejecting the Caretaker model of humanity and asserting that we are the same as any other creature. One of the radical challenges that Darwinism made to traditional religious views of humanity was essentially the same: There is no qualitative difference between all species of life. They all evolved from the same original organisms. Modern genetics has shown us how close that relationship is. For example, humans and their primate cousins, the chimpanzees, have some 98 percent of the same genetic structure. This knowledge is important for us to realize in forming an environmental ethic as it replaces human arrogance with a sense of our real connection to all life.

In the Book of Job in chapters 38-42 there is another version of the Creature model. These chapters, which come near the end of the Book of Job, are God's speeches to Job out of a tempest. They are the climax to a work that is a meditation on the nature of evil in the world. The Book of Job is a parable about a pious man whose piety is tested by God through the loss of all his possessions, his children and his health. Job's friends come and give him conventional explanations for his suffering. He demonstrates that the traditional theology for his suffering is
inadequate, cruel and immoral. Job demands an accounting from God for this injustice and, finally, God appears in a tempest to answer him.

But God does not directly address Job's objections. Instead, God asks a series of rhetorical questions about whether Job can match divine power and wisdom in creating and sustaining the world. The speeches are magnificent poetic evocations of the breadth, diversity and terrible beauty of God's creative power. Humans or human society are not even mentioned in these speeches. In the final chapter (42), Job admits his ignorance and limited perspective about God, accepts his suffering and is silenced. God then rewards him with the restoration of his wealth and the birth of new children. Job eventually dies "old and contented."

These final chapters have been subject to numerous interpretations. Whatever the meaning of God's answer to Job, it seems evident that God is trying to demonstrate to Job that divine providence is radically different from the conventional theology Job believed in and expected to work. Concerning these chapters, biblical scholar Jon D. Levenson concluded, "The brunt of that harangue is that creation is a wondrous and mysterious place that baffles human assumptions and expectations because it not anthropocentric but theocentric" (Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p.155-6).

Chapters 38-41 are powerful responses to human arrogance and myopic anthropocentrism. The author of Job is telling us that we are not always the center of God's concern and that we can never understand fully the workings of God's universe or the nature of God. We can, however, find deep spiritual nourishment in the contemplation of Creation. By contemplating the "wondrous and mysterious place" that is Creation; we can look beyond ourselves and be brought to a better understanding of perspective on the universe.

These four voices from the Hebrew Bible can be seen as complimentary not contradictory. The editors of the biblical canon evidentially found it important to include them all as they must have resonated with the community that found these works to be sacred. Today, we need not choose one over the other but understand how the wisdom they represent can still teach us to care for Creation in humility and love as the most primary expression of God's revelation.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-lawrence-troster/biblical-voices-on-creation_b_859549.html

May 11, 2011

Hindus back Pontifical Academy of Sciences’ call to “protect the habitat”

ANI Press Release

Hindus have supported the call of Pontifical Academy of Sciences to “people and nations” to “recognise the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming”.

Hindus back Pontifical Academy of Sciences' call to "protect the habitat"
This 15-page Report by the Academy commissioned Working Group, posted on the Vatican website on May 10, declared: “We appeal to all nations to develop and implement, without delay, effective and fair policies to reduce the causes and impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems, including mountain glaciers and their watersheds, aware that we all live in the same home… we must protect the habitat that sustains us…”

Hindu statesman Rajan Zed, in a statement in Nevada (USA) today, said that faiths coming out in support of the environment was a remarkable signal.

Zed, who is president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, urged all world religious leaders, religions and denominations to openly bless the environmental causes. Ancient Hindu scriptures, especially Atharva-Veda, were highly respectful of mother nature, he added.

We may believe in different religions, yet we share the same home—our Earth. We must learn to happily progress or miserably perish together. For man can live individually but can only survive collectively, Rajan Zed says quoting scriptures.

Pontifical Academy of Sciences, launched in 1603 and located in Vatican City, which includes many Nobel laureates with Werner Arber as President, claims to be the first exclusively scientific academy in the world. Roman Catholic Church headquartered in Vatican City and headed by Pope is the largest of the Christian denominations. Hinduism, oldest and third largest religion of the world, has about one billion adherents and moksh (liberation) is its ultimate goal.


May 12, 2011

The Dharmic Method to Save the Planet

By Pankaj Jain
Huffington Post

An eminent scholar recently came to our university campus and spoke about the role of diverse religious communities of the world and their attitudes toward the environment. He showed examples from several indigenous communities from the North America, South America, Africa and Asia. However, when he referred to the traditions of India, he used these words: "India has the most bizarre culture in the world where even a cobra is worshipped. This is a bit of an overshoot." What amazed me was that even in this supposedly globalized world that we live in, India continues to mystify scholars. While most Americans are familiar with the terms such as "yoga" and "Bollywood," Indian perspectives toward the ecology seem to be largely unknown.

It is true that cobras are worshipped by many Hindus, especially on a specific festival dedicated to them (just as there are specific festivals for mountains, rivers, cows, trees and hundreds of other gods and goddesses throughout India). What is not commonly known is that Mahatma
Gandhi had a brief encounter with a cobra at his ashram (retreat) once and he too did not want it to be killed by his colleagues. This is one of the shining examples of Indian environmentalism, not an "overshoot" as called by our scholar friend mentioned above. Several scientific studies have pointed out that every being in nature is intrinsically valuable because every other being is directly or indirectly dependent on each other's survival. This is the fundamental motivation of scientists and environmentalists to save the biodiversity in every part of our planet. Therefore, even a cobra has the right to survive. Moreover, other beings have an intrinsic duty to protect it as long as it is not a threat to them.

More than 2,500 years ago in India, Mahavira and Buddha taught the same concept, although in a different framework of philosophy, spirituality and ethics. Mahavira, the last great teacher of Jainism, even proclaimed that *ahimsa* (nonviolence) is the greatest dharma. (Dharma's meanings include religion, ethics, duty, virtue, righteousness and cosmic law.) Several Hindu and Buddhist texts also propound the same principle in different languages. According to most of these texts, ahimsa improves one's karma. For observant Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, hurting or harming another being damages one's karma and obstructs advancement toward *moksha* (liberation). To prevent the further accrual of bad karma, they are instructed to avoid activities associated with violence and to follow a vegetarian diet (meat consumption in India has historically been very less compared to elsewhere). They also oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds and fish for human consumption. Just this month, [my book](#) is published based on my research with three communities in India and the diaspora with several ecological practices inspired by the Indic traditions.

Although yoga is widely known in the West, what is not so widely known is that yoga is a system of eight "limbs" or components. The very first step of the first limb of yoga is ahimsa. Unless one is firmly rooted in ahimsa in one's thoughts, speech and actions, true practice of yoga cannot begin. In addition, since Gandhi was a dedicated practitioner of ahimsa (and other yogic principles), he can be called a great yogi even though he might not have practiced all the stretching exercises that we commonly refer to as yoga. It is this practice of yoga that develops one's harmony with and reverence for nature in which even a cobra is not to be killed.

When I first mentioned this to my own students recently, one immediately questioned me and asked if Indians in India are not following the principles of Gandhi, how can we expect the same from others? I partially agreed with her. India (and many other emerging nations in the world) is enthusiastically aping the West with its ever-expanding economy and ever-shrinking natural resources. I was also asked recently at a conference on world religions and ecology, what do the non-Western countries expect of the Western countries? If the rest of the world is eager to make the same mistakes as the West did, what route should the West now take to ensure the planet's survival? Perhaps, one answer could be to embrace Gandhi and his ecological practices. If the West is to remain the intellectual leader of the world, the quicker it reforms and transforms itself, the better for our planet. While the West continues to crave more natural resources without changing its lifestyle, it will continue to lack the moral authority to preach to other cultures. It was the West that led the world with its modern scientific and technological innovations for the last several centuries. It will have to be the West that emerges as a new ecological leader, with Gandhi as the foundation of its lifestyle. All voices to save the planet's ecology are hollow rhetoric until that happens.
There cannot be and should not be separate "war on terrorism," "war on climate change," "war on drugs," "war on corruption," "war on obesity" and so on. Our physical, mental and spiritual health, the environment, the global security, international peace and social justice -- it seems like everything will get a great boost if we first become nonviolent in our most basic activity: eating and surviving. "We are what we eat." It is such a simple statement and yet is so widely ignored all over the world. This is the way Gandhi lived everyday and his protest against the imperial power was influential because it was based on his own great life, unlike many contemporary activists whose own lives are nowhere close to the Gandhi's.

Gandhi's entire life can be seen as an ecological treatise. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion or thought functioned much like an ecosystem: his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his spinning wheel, his abhorrence of waste, his resorting to basic Hindu and Jain values of truth, nonviolence, celibacy and fasting. The moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers and environmentalists all take their inspirations from Gandhi's life and other dharmic teachings.

As an alternative perspective on contemporary India, despite all the recent advances in India's economy and consumerism, Gandhi's inspiration still thrives in modern India. Here are contemporary environmental activists and dharmic leaders who have modeled their lives taking their inspirations from dharmic teachings of India or have resisted the global consumerist pressure in various other ways: Sunderlal Bahuguna, now in his 80s, leader of the famous Chipko Movement in North India; Medha Patkar, astrong voice against big dams in Central India; Dr. Vandana Shiva, fierce critic of Western style globalism and capitalism; Anna Hazare, in headlines recently for his major protest against political corruption and also famous for ecological experiments in his village in Central India; Pandurang Hedge, who is leading Chipko style movement in South India; late Pandurang Shastri Athavale (I have written about his global Swadhyaya Parivar in my book); late Anil Agarwal, founder of Center for Science and Environment; Dr. Ramachandra Guha, another fierce critic of Western-style consumerism, capitalism and environmentalism, including deep ecology; and hundreds of smaller voices spread all over India making India the land of biggest environmental movement on the planet (as noted by Dr. Christopher Chapple in his volume on Hinduism and ecology published by Harvard University). There are also dozens of institutions in several Indian towns founded by Gandhi himself that are still flourishing with their own small-scale production of textiles and agriculture. In addition, almost every Indian political party must use at least the rhetoric based on Gandhi's values whenever there is a discussion on taking technology or any kind of help from the U.S., U.K., France or other major Western power. They all immediately attack their political opponents as if somebody just was "sold out to the West." Finally, there are several recent major Bollywood blockbusters with several Gandhi-like figures reminding the audience of the message of Gandhi (nonviolence and civil disobedience).

Yes, Gandhi's immortal soul and other dharmic traditions of India are still vibrant even in the 21st-century globalized consumerist society. Several decades ago, in his nonviolent movement for civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method." It is time again to go back to these cherished values propounded by Christ, Gandhi and Dr. King: nonviolence not just toward other human beings but also toward
the entire earth. All three also practiced and preached an absolute simple lifestyle and it is time again to practice the same lifestyle.

*Please join me on a free Webinar on May 19 to discuss these topics further. [Click here to register online.]*

Dr. Pankaj Jain is an Assistant Professor of Indian Religions and Ecology at the University of North Texas. He has taught Indian Films, Sanskrit, Hindi/Urdu languages, and literatures at North Carolina State University, Rutgers, Kean University, Jersey City University and the University of Iowa. In his scholarship, he connects the ancient Indic traditions of Hinduism and Jainism with contemporary issues -- particularly the environment. He is the author of *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability.*

Follow Pankaj Jain, Ph.D. on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/pankajaindia](http://www.twitter.com/pankajaindia)


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**May 12, 2011**

$5 Million in Grants to Study the Healing and Restorative Power of Nature

National Open Spaces Sacred Places Awards Initiative

Press Release

The TKF Foundation today announced a new $5 million grant program, the National Open Spaces Sacred Places Awards (OSSP Awards), to fund cross-disciplinary teams of designers, research social scientists and community-based organizations to create and study a series of new public green spaces designed with the specific intent to provide spiritual uplift and the opportunity for a deeper human experience through a personal connection to nature. The OSSP Awards program will be the foundation’s final grant making initiative and will effectively spend down TKF’s endowment by 2018.

In announcing the grant opportunity, Tom Stoner, president of the Annapolis, MD-based TKF Foundation said, “In a time when we are more and more surrounded by the built world, beset by ever increasing stress and overwhelmed by technology, the need for open, sacred places in nature is more important than ever. Every neighborhood needs a place where people can be in nature and reconnect to themselves, to the land, and to each other. In order to make this vision a reality, we must document and communicate the transformational impact these spaces can have on individual lives and communities.” Stoner is also the author of the 2009 book, *Open Spaces Sacred Places.*

By 2030 nearly two-thirds of the world population will live in urban environments. In 2008, more than 80% of the United States population was already there. While more public green
spaces are being built every day, a gap exists in the understanding of the impact these spaces have on the human spirit, individual and community well being.

The Open Spaces Sacred Places Awards Request for Proposals (http://www.opensacred.org/grants) invites national partnerships of the highest caliber to apply. Universities, hospitals, research centers and cultural institutions; professionals in the field of landscape design, urban planning, and health care; and neighborhood associations, community-based and other social benefit organizations are encouraged to form collaborative teams to envision, create, study and communicate what is learned about the impact of Open Spaces Sacred Places on people living in stressful urban environments.

Funding will be enacted in two phases:

- Up to 10 planning grants will be awarded on December 15, 2011. Participation in the planning grant round is optional. Deadline for application for a planning grant is September 1, 2011.
- Open Spaces Sacred Places Awards will be announced on December 15 2012. The Open Spaces Sacred Places RFP will be issued February 12, 2010. Deadline for application for a National Open Spaces Sacred Places Award is June 30, 2012.

The TKF Foundation was created in 1996 by Tom and Kitty Stoner to provide the opportunity for a deeper human experience by inspiring and supporting the creation of Open Spaces Sacred Places, public green spaces that offer a temporary place of sanctuary, encourage reflection, provide solace, and engender peace and well being. Since TKF’s founding, 130 Open Space Sacred Place sites have been created across the Baltimore-Annapolis-Washington, DC region. Visit www.opensacred.org for a list of sites and their locations.

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May 12, 2011

No place to land: Loss of natural habitats threatens migratory birds globally

Observed in over 50 countries on 14-15 May, World Migratory Bird Day 2011 looks at "Land use changes from a bird's-eye view"

United Nations Environment Programme
Bonn/Nairobi - On their epic journeys, often spanning thousands of kilometres, migratory birds cross many borders, linking different countries as well as ecosystems. The annual migration of an estimated 50 billion birds representing around 19 per cent of the world's 10,000 bird species is one of nature's great natural wonders. Yet each year, more and more of the natural habitats migratory birds need to complete their journeys either diminish or disappear completely.

The theme for World Migratory Bird Day 2011, celebrated around the world on 14-15 May, is 'Land use changes from a bird's-eye view' and it highlights the negative effects human activities are having on migratory birds, their habitats and the planet's natural environment.

The loss, fragmentation and degradation of natural bird habitats is occurring globally and is mainly caused by the pressures resulting from a growing human population, rapid urbanization and unsustainable human use of natural areas.

"Although migratory birds face many serious threats, the way humans use the land around them has by far the greatest negative effect. Unsustainable human land use, whether through deforestation, intensive agriculture, biofuel production, land reclamation, urbanization and mining directly removes or damages the habitats of migratory birds, affecting their populations on a global scale", said Bert Lenten, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and initiator of the World Migratory Bird Day campaign.

World Migratory Bird Day is being organized by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) - two intergovernmental wildlife treaties administered by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). BirdLife International, Wetlands International and the Secretariat of the Partnership for the East Asian - Australasian Flyway (EAAFP) are also main partners of the global campaign.

"As the two intergovernmental treaties dedicated to the conservation of migratory animals, including migratory birds at global and flyway scale, the Convention on Migratory Species and the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement have launched World Migratory Bird Day to make people aware of the threats migratory birds face along their migration routes", added Mr. Lenten.

CMS and AEWA bring together governments and other stakeholders to coordinate and further develop global flyways policy, to ensure that all flyways in the world benefit from some kind of coordination mechanism that promotes cooperation at ground level among the countries involved. This includes working towards establishing a viable network of sites which can be used by migratory birds to breed, rest and refuel during their migration.

Dr. Marco Lambertini, BirdLife International's Chief Executive said: 'Land-use change poses an immediate and increasing threat to the world's migratory birds. Habitats vital to these species on their incredible journeys are being destroyed or degraded at an alarming rate and the bird's-eye view is becoming bleaker. The BirdLife Partnership, with over 110 conservation organizations along the world's flyways, is working across borders to help stem this tide and achieve the effective joined-up conservation needed to make a difference for these inspiring birds.'
Initiated in 2006, World Migratory Bird Day is an annual campaign backed by the United Nations and is devoted to celebrating migratory birds and promoting their conservation worldwide.

Events for WMBD 2011 in over 50 countries will include bird festivals, education programmes, presentations, film screenings and birdwatching trips, run by hundreds of volunteers, dedicated groups and organizations around the world.

**Notes to Editors**

**Land Reclamation in the Yellow Sea**

The loss of intertidal mud flats due to land reclamation in the Yellow Sea has caused a dramatic decline in migratory shorebird numbers across the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The shores of the Yellow Sea, bounded by China and North and South Korea are a key staging site for many shorebirds using this Flyway on their annual migration from Australasia to their Arctic breeding grounds.

"As the number of humans in the East Asian - Australasian Flyway approaches half of the global total, migratory waterbirds that use the same landscapes face escalating, overwhelming threats. Routine destruction of inter-tidal habitats at massive scale and disturbance at key sites are lowering populations of coastal waterbirds, pushing some to threatened status and others to near extinction", said Roger Jaensch, Chief Executive of the Partnership for the East Asian - Australasian Flyway (EAAFP) Secretariat in his statement to mark World Migratory Bird Day 2011.

Land reclamation in the Yellow Sea has destroyed nearly 50 per cent of the region's intertidal mud flats in the last 25 years. "Less well known but equally concerning are the changes to freshwater habitats from intensification of agriculture and diversion of water from wetlands to expanding irrigation and urban areas", added Mr. Jaensch. Link: http://www.eaaflyway.net/

**Protecting the Critical Sites for Migratory Birds**

Knowing where the critical sites for migratory birds are is key to their conservation. Increasingly sophisticated tools such as the [Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Critical Site Network (CSN) Tool](http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org/critical-sites) can tell us where the critical sites for migratory birds are. This information can significantly help conservation efforts, but also facilitate national implementation of international environment agreements, such as AEWA and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

"Our knowledge of the sites critical to the migration of many bird populations has increased steadily over the last decades. For migratory waterbirds in Africa and Eurasia for instance, a lot of information is readily available through the Critical Site Network (CSN) Tool developed within the Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) project. The future challenge is to have this information integrated and taken into account into national multi-sectoral development and land use planning", said Marco Barbieri, Acting Executive Secretary of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). "The new impetus to the development of National
Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans provided by the recent CBD COP in Nagoya could offer a great opportunity in this regard" said Barbieri.

Although currently limited to the African-Eurasian region and those migratory waterbirds covered by AEWA, the CSN Tool brings together some of the most current and comprehensive information available internationally on these species and the sites they use in this area.

The CSN Tool was jointly developed by Wetlands International, BirdLife International and the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in the framework of the UNEP-GEF Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project, funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the German Government and several other partners and donors. The WOW Project was the largest international, flyway-scale waterbird and wetland conservation initiative ever undertaken in the African-Eurasian region. Link: www.wingsoverwetlands.org/csntool

Migratory birds as indicators for a changing environment

Because of their dependence on many habitats along their migration routes, migratory birds often feel the effects of these changing environments first before many other animal species, making them key indicators for the health of our environment.

In a statement to mark World Migratory Bird Day 2011, Professor Nick Davidson, Deputy Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands said: "Migratory birds have been called "global sentinels of environmental change" because in the course of a year they move between and sample the health of many different places and habitats throughout the world. Their state of health provides us with a clear signal about the overall changing state of our environment. And the signal is not good."

"For migratory birds the world certainly failed to reach the 2010 target of reducing the rate of loss of biological diversity. To address the follow-up "Aichi Targets" adopted at the Convention on Biological Diversity's COP10 in Nagoya last year and to which all environmental conventions including Ramsar, CMS and AEWA are committed to collaborating on delivery, needs a redoubling of efforts by all of us, whether governments, business or civil society, to stem and reverse the underlying cause of migratory bird declines", said Professor Davidson. Link: http://www.ramsar.org/

Statements to mark World Migratory Bird Day:

All statements received to mark World Migratory Bird Day 2011 can be found here: Link: www.worldmigratorybirdday.org/statements

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD)

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) is a global initiative devoted to celebrating migratory birds and for promoting their conservation worldwide. It is being organized by the Secretariats of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) - two international wildlife treaties administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The WMBD 2011 campaign has also received support from
the following partners: UNEP, BirdLife International, Wetlands International, the Partnership for the East Asian - Australasian Flyway (EAAFP).

The World Migratory Bird Day 2011 campaign is made possible through part of the voluntary contribution given to the CMS and AEWA Secretariats by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU).

Events in over 50 countries

As of 12 May 2011, over 140 separate events in more than 50 countries have been registered on the campaign website. WMBD events will be celebrated in: Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Palau, Peru, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Serbia, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United Republic of Tanzania and the United States of America.

Global Event Map

For more information and an overview of all registered World Migratory Bird Day events please see the Global Event Map: Link: www.worldmigratorybirdday.org/events

Highlighted Events

Vancouver, Canada - Mayor Robinson of the city of Vancouver Proclaims World Migratory Bird Day

For the first time, World Migratory Bird Day Events in Vancouver Canada will celebrate the wonder and importance of bird migration. After reading the City of Vancouver Mayor Robinson's World Migratory Bird Day proclamation, bird watching and educational walks in Stanley Park will be conducted by the Stanley Park Ecology Society to learn about local species that migrate through Vancouver each year.

Erbil, Bagdad and Chibaish, Iraq - Nature Iraq to celebrate the Importance of Iraqi Wetlands on World Migratory Bird Day

To celebrate World Migratory Bird Day, Nature Iraq is participating with the French Cultural Centre in Erbil in an exhibition highlighting the migration routes through Iraq and its marshlands, stressing the importance of sites such as the Iraq marshlands for migratory birds.

Additional activities are planned in Baghdad and Chibaish where Iraq's southern marshes are arguably some of the most important sites in the Middle East as a stop-over site for migratory birds. Nature Iraq has been working with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment to develop protected areas throughout the country including a National Park in the Central Marshes near Chibaish, Southern Iraq.
Wadden Sea, Germany - Events in Northern Germany to Celebrate Unique Wadden Sea Habitats

A large part of the Wadden Sea was recently listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its international importance as one of the main breeding, staging, moulting and wintering areas for millions of migratory waterbirds using the East Atlantic Flyway. Birdwatching and educational walks will celebrate these mudflats as critical habitat for up to 10 to 12 million migratory birds which use the site each year.

Main Organizations behind World Migratory Bird Day

Convention on Migratory Species

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS is a fast-growing convention with special importance due to its expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 115 countries are parties to the Convention. Link: www.cms.int

African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA)

The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) is an intergovernmental treaty developed under the auspices of CMS dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds using the African-Eurasian Flyways. The Agreement covers 255 species of birds ecologically dependent on wetlands for at least part of their annual cycle. The treaty covers a large geographic area, including Europe, parts of Asia, Canada, the Middle East and Africa. So far 63 out of the 118 countries in this area have become Contracting Parties to the International Agreement. Link: http://www.unep-aewa.org

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May 16, 2011

Secretary-General, at Event Marking 2,600 Years since Buddha’s Enlightenment, Urges Remembrance of His Message: Tolerance, Respect for All Religions

United Nations
Press Release

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s remarks to the special event marking the 2,600th anniversary of the enlightenment of the Buddha, in New York today, 16 May:

I am pleased to celebrate this auspicious occasion with you. It is a personal celebration for me, since my mother is a devout Buddhist.

I remember being inspired by the teachings of the Buddha as a child. The wisdom of mindfulness, compassion and peace. These values guided me through my early years. And they were part of what motivated me to seek a career in public service. Three years ago, I visited the Buddha’s birthplace at Lumbini in Nepal. As I walked through the sacred grounds, I gave silent thanks for his teachings.

Buddhism and the United Nations share the goals of peace, dignity and human rights for all people. That is why, more than 10 years ago, the General Assembly passed a resolution on recognizing the Day of Vesak around the world. At the time, the representative of Sri Lanka quoted a famous saying of the Buddha: “One may conquer millions in battle, but he who conquers himself is alone the greatest of conquerors.”

This reminds me of the first words of the UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] Constitution, which states that, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”.

In our world of conflict and war, the United Nations is building strong defences of peace. Through mediation, dialogue and diplomacy. Through removing the conditions that cause unrest, from hunger and poverty to inequality and injustice. And through our unwavering commitment to protecting our planet’s environment.

In this great effort, we can learn from the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Two thousand six hundred years ago, he advanced the idea that all people are interlinked. Today, we see how true that is. We are linked by air travel, mobile phones and social networks. We are all vulnerable to threats like disease, environmental pollution and natural disasters. We can only overcome these problems by banding together for our common humanity. Our fates are intertwined.

Two thousand six hundred years ago, the Lord Buddha taught that life and its environment are one. Today, we know that the way we treat our planet directly affects
us. When we poison our water supply or exhaust our resources, we will suffer the effects. When we care for our environment and protect nature, we can reap the benefits.

Two thousand six hundred years ago, the Lord Buddha preached non-violence and profound respect for all living beings. Today, we are far from realizing these noble principles, but we understand the urgency of this task. That is why we work to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, why we promote mutual understanding and why we seek to resolve disputes peacefully.

The Buddha’s teachings may be 26 centuries old, but they are as powerful as ever today. As we celebrate the enlightenment of the Buddha, let us remember, above all, his message of tolerance. Let us respect all religions. And let us work for the well-being of all people.


May 17, 2011

Spot an Orchid in your Churchyard

Churchyard wildlife watch for UN International Biodiversity Day (May 22)

Church of England Press Release

Shrinking the Footprint, the Church of England's national environmental campaign, is encouraging churchgoers to follow in the footsteps of the Rev Gilbert White and other naturalists to take a closer look at wild plants, including those with faith links, in their churchyards.

International orchid expert the Revd David Ridgway (vicar of St Stephen's, St Albans) says orchids, along with a range of other wild flowers, are blooming at this time of year and, with the onset of early spring, there is a host of wildlife to be spotted in churchyards. (Listen to the podcast).

As a partner in the UN International Biodiversity celebrations, Shrinking the Footprint has drawn up a list of plants and web links that will help nature enthusiasts make the most of some 10,000 churchyards around the country.

With monocropping and chemical pesticides used in farms and gardens, churchyards are often the most biodiverse places in communities. Wildlife audits have revealed a surprising range of wild flowers and animal life in churchyards.
Some plants, like meadow saxifrage and the green winged orchid, are now only found in churchyards. These grow side by side with other plants gathered naturally over the years, but also alongside those introduced inadvertently from decorations in the church or on graves.

Speaking in the Commons last week, the Second Church Estates Commissioner, Tony Baldry MP, encouraged churches to celebrate Biodiversity Sunday by recording the growth of their Millennium yews. The Conservation Foundation donated 8,500 yew trees to churches to celebrate the Millennium.

David Shreeve, the Church of England's national environment adviser, said: "There is a wealth of wildlife in our churchyards which, when added together, form the country's largest and most biodiverse nature reserve. This year is a great opportunity for churchgoers to spend time appreciating what special places our churchyards are in providing their communities with local Noah's Arks of biodiversity which everyone can share not just this Sunday but every day - for free"

**Plants with faith links:**

Columbine - *Aquilegia vulgaris* - is also known as 'dove flower'. The dove is a symbol for new creation and baptism and carvings of the flower are often found in cathedrals and churches.

Sorrel - *Rumex acetosa* - was one of the bitter herbs that Hebrew people ate with Passover lamb and so possibly part of the Last Supper.

Moschatel - *Adoxa moschatellina* - also known as the Good Friday flower. There is no other flower like it with its five petals facing north, south, east and west and a fifth facing the sky and a scent of musk. It is the only species in its genus and the only genus in its family in the world.

Wild Pansy - *Viola tricolor* - a member of the violet family, and also known as 'heartsease' and 'Trinity Violets' because they are yellow, white and purple.

Cow Parsley - *Anthriscus sylvestris* - also sometimes known as 'Our Lady's Lace'

Pasque Flower - *Pulsatilla vulgaris* - thought to be the lilies of the field Jesus pointed to in his Sermon on the Mount.

Solomon's Seal - *Polygonatum multiflorum* - grows in the wild now only in a few places. King Solomon was renowned for his wisdom, composed 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs and built the first temple.
Speedwell - *Veronica*. When Jesus carried his cross, Veronica was the girl in the crowd who offered him her handkerchief. When Jesus handed it back his face was imprinted on the cloth. An old country name for speedwell is 'God's Eye'.

Lady’s Smock - *Cardamine pratensis*. In the cloisters of Lincoln Cathedral which is dedicated to Our Lady there is a garden full of her flowers.

Lords and Ladies - *Arum maculatum* - has also been known as 'Parson in the pulpit' and 'Parson in his smock'.

**Useful web links:**
- [http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/) - "protecting wildlife for the future" with examples of churchyard audits
- [http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/) conservation charity for churchyards and burial grounds
- [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk) - news and advice on gardening for all
- [http://www.orchid.org.uk/intro.htm](http://www.orchid.org.uk/intro.htm) Orchid Society website with lots of info and advice

**Notes**
The Revd Gilbert White (18 July 1720 - 26 June 1793) was a pioneering English naturalist and ornithologist, as well as a Church of England priest. He is well known for his publication *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789).

Listen to international orchid expert the Revd David Ridgway at [http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/follow-us-online/podcasts.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/follow-us-online/podcasts.aspx)


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**May 18, 2011**

EPA Weighs Threats Posed by Mercury Used in Religious Rituals
When a Puerto Rican family moved into its new Rhode Island home last year, it didn't notice anything amiss about the first-floor apartment on a busy Cumberland street.

But within months, the family's 3-year-old daughter began getting blisters on her hands. Soon, the toddler's skin began to peel off, and her mother rushed her to the hospital.

Several days and tests later, doctors had a diagnosis: mercury poisoning. Urine samples showed mercury levels at four times the normal amount, and government officials speculate that the family's apartment was once sprinkled with mercury in a religious blessing.

Arnold Wendroff believes the case proves what he has argued for two decades -- that the religious use of mercury is a real danger to minority communities that follow Afro-Caribbean rituals.

The government has "been able to get away with not doing anything because it's conjecture," the Brooklyn-based activist said in a recent interview. "Here we have the best possible evidence that it's not conjecture, but it's real."

As U.S. EPA renews its focus on environmental justice, the agency faces new expectations that it will address a slew of environmental hazards that affect poor and minority communities. Some problems are obvious and irrefutable, such as a hazardous waste dump in a poor neighborhood, but others are controversial and more difficult to assess.

In the past, experts and government agencies have agreed that the religious use of mercury is a problem. But they have been debating for years whether it is enough of a problem to necessitate further studies and outreach.

EPA's Task Force on Ritualistic Uses of Mercury called in 2002 for more research, cautioning federal agencies to "balance these recommendations against other existing priorities."

Meanwhile, leaders of the communities potentially affected by and large have said the problem is overblown.

To Wendroff, however, such uses of mercury drive to the heart of environmental justice: It affects an underserved community, is poorly understood and has received only intermittent attention.

"These organizations, these agencies have a mandate to address issues that appear to be problematic," said Wendroff, who has a doctorate in the sociology of medicine.

"It's a no brainer that if it's real, it's very serious."
Hunting the elusive 'azogue'

Wendroff is an encyclopedia of mercury poisoning knowledge, recalling from memory every study supporting his contention that certain minority populations are at risk from mercury in their homes.

He has studied the issue since 1989, when he was teaching science at a Brooklyn middle school and one of his students told him that his mother sprinkled mercury on their floor. Bought at a local "botanica," the mercury capsules were used in Santeria, a religion that originated with Caribbean slaves. Such practitioners know the substance by its Spanish name, "azoque."

Wendroff now believes his student was a victim of chronic mercury poisoning, exhibiting signs such as anorexia, short-term memory loss and a dislike of being observed. He has become a one-man advocacy machine, shooting off letters to lawmakers, hounding federal agencies, submitting articles to publications and using his own resources to ferret out evidence. He prints out every document -- including hundreds of emails -- and meticulously files them away.

His goal: convincing the government to do a study that measures the mercury vapor levels in Caribbean-Latino homes. He has no doubt that the findings would support his belief that such families -- especially children -- are at risk for health problems.

"No one wants to know. No one has been following up," he said. "They don't want to know because there's no bad guy with deep pockets other than government agencies."

EPA officials say otherwise, pointing to past studies and an outreach brochure that explains the dangers of mercury. A request for an interview was declined, but in a statement, the agency emphasized that it "works to reduce possible exposure to mercury, particularly in areas where potential for exposure is higher, i.e. in populations that rely on subsistence fishing or use mercury for ritualistic purposes."

But little movement has been made since 2005, when EPA commissioned a study on the ritualistic use of mercury, hiring Lockheed Martin to study mercury vapors after sprinkling between 2 and 15 grams in a trailer. Researchers found air concentrations spiked, and then decreased over time. But if it was disturbed or shaken -- as it might be in a home -- the levels rose again.

"Periodic application of a small amount of mercury for a sustained period of time within the same enclosure could lead to chronic mercury vapor exposure above the residential occupancy level," the report found. "The potential health risks of this practice were not explored in this study but warrant further investigation.

Whether such levels of mercury are found in a significant number of homes is a source of debate. A 1998 study of 100 children in New York City's South Bronx found that 5 percent had elevated levels in their urine of mercury. But researchers were unable to directly link those levels to
ritualistic uses. One of the study's authors -- Philip Ozuah -- has since said that he does not think it's a wide-ranging problem.

In 2003, however, the consulting firm John Snow Inc. conducted a survey of Latino residents in Lawrence, Mass., visiting botanicas, beauty salons, community meetings, churches and various other locations. Of the 898 respondents, 344 reported that they either knew someone who used mercury for spiritual or health reasons or used it themselves. The firm's employees also found botanicas selling capsules that contained 9 grams of mercury.

"A larger, more definitive, citywide study would provide far better data about the extent of the problem," researchers wrote in the final report to Massachusetts' Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. "While such as study would be interesting, we feel we have sufficient knowledge about the extent of mercury use to recommend that allocation of limited resources be used for prevention and remediation programs."

Into thin air

The recent case in Rhode Island provides the most direct example of the dangers of an indoor mercury spill. An official from Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management found elevated levels throughout the home and noted in a report that "a spot in the master bedroom in front of the dresser was identified as the possible source of the mercury vapor."

The report also mentions the possibility of the apartment's former tenant blessing the house with mercury. But that tenant has since claimed that her daughter broke a mercury thermometer.

The mother of the affected 3-year-old is now seeking reparations from her landlord for his "failure to properly clean the premises prior to renting said apartment." Her lawyer, Yvette Boisclair, did not return a call requesting a comment.

Wendroff places the blame on the government, which he says has done a poor job in educating the public of the effects of mercury exposure. The medical community should also be more informed, he said; hospitals and clinics in communities that potentially use mercury should know to test for it in children exhibiting signs of exposure.

"Government agencies say, 'We did this, we did that, we informed them,'" he said. "The reality is the public at large has no clue, but, more important, the clinical community has no clue."


May 23, 2011

Consciously Recognizing Ourselves Before We Die
When our physical body dies, will we recognize ourselves as a subtle body of light, love, music, and knowing? Will we recognize the unique orchestration of our being, the distinct way we light up the world? If we fail to recognize ourselves in this way -- if we require the assistance of a physical body to anchor our self-recognition -- then we are profoundly limiting ourselves. The afterlife is unknown; however, our invisible body of music, light and love that lives in eternity is knowable. In fact, every person that we encounter can instantly recognize these unique and invisible qualities within us. Our responsibility is not to be concerned with the afterlife, but to be so fully present in this life that we recognize the familiar resonance of who we are, wherever we might be.

Many spiritual traditions tell us how important it is to be awake to our soulful nature at the time of death. What happens after we die seems likely to forever remain a mystery. However, if we do not become familiar with our subtle self while we have the precious vehicle of a physical body, we can fail to recognize ourselves when our physical body dies. Because we are created from an invisible life force, we may die and not see that this life force is who and what we are. Our physical body is an anchor for light illuminating light, knowing recognizing knowing, and love appreciating love. If, in freedom, we have not made friends with ourselves during this lifetime, our physical bodies can die and the animating life energy of our being may dissipate and lose its coherence. We may then require the constraint of a material world to enable us to encounter ourselves once again.

Why should we be concerned with recognizing the eternal being within ourselves while we are alive in this physical realm? Jesus gives an important answer when he says, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you." (John 14:2). I believe Jesus is saying that, in the vast ecology of the living universe, there are spaces suitable for all beings.

Buddhists also believe we must discover our subtle, inner nature so we can recognize ourselves when we die as pure awareness or as the "ground luminosity." Because the essence of who we are is so subtle, when we die we can become confused, disoriented, and unable to sustain self-recognition. To keep from becoming overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, colors, and visions that arise in the passage through bodily death, Buddhists teach that we must attain some degree of stability in self-recognition in the here and now. If we pay attention to the natural wakefulness and feeling presence at the core of our everyday consciousness, we will be familiar with ourselves at the time of death. The Dalai Lama counsels that, because we don't know when we will die, it is of great importance to be prepared as, at the time of death, the total responsibility for awareness falls upon us. He writes, "The body is compared to a guest house; it is a place to stay for just a short time... When the day comes for consciousness to leave, the guest house of the body must be left behind."

If the universe were non-living at its foundations, it would take a miracle to save us from extinction at the time of death, and then to take us from here to a heaven (or promised land) of continuing aliveness. However, if the universe is alive, then we are already nested and growing within its aliveness. When our physical body dies, the life-stream that we are will move into the larger aliveness of the living universe. We don't need a miracle to save us -- we are already
inside the miracle of sustaining aliveness. Instead of being saved from death, our job is to bring mindful attention to our enduring aliveness in the here and now.

Our awakening is not the end of our spiritual journey, but rather, the barest beginning. As we learn the skills of consciously recognizing ourselves as beings of light, love, music, and knowing, we are meeting the basic requirement for our journey through eternity. Once knowingness knows itself directly, then that knowingness can live and learn forever as a luminous stream of being in the deep ecology of the universe. Awakening is never finished: We will forever be "enlightening" ourselves -- becoming lighter -- so that we have the ability to participate in ever more free, subtle, open, delicate and expressive ecologies of being and becoming.

When we die, we will not need to remember the material details of our lives because the knowing-resonance that we are already embodies the essential wisdom of our lifetime of experience. In the words of the spiritual teacher Thomas Merton, "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul." As we cultivate our capacity for mindful living, we lessen the need for a material world and a physical body to awaken the knowing process to itself.

Now is the time to recognize ourselves. When we consciously become intimate friends with ourselves, we directly participate in the life-stream of the universe and cultivate the body of knowing that lives and moves within the deep ecology of the universe. At the heart of life is a simple task: to become intimate and forgiving friends with ourselves and to grow as a stream of light, love, music, and knowing.

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**Spring 2011**

**The Yamuna River: India’s Dying Goddess**

By Richard Conniff

The Journal of the Yale School Forestry & Environmental Studies

Early this year, at the point in northern India where the Yamuna River empties into the Ganges, several hundred people set out on a six-week protest march. They were aiming to gather strength in numbers en route to New Delhi, the national capital, halfway up the Yamuna River. The river itself was the subject of their protest, and the popular chant was “Yamuna Bachao, Pollution Bhagao!”—meaning “Save the Yamuna, Stop the Pollution!”
They had ample cause for complaint. The Yamuna River starts out clear as rainwater from a lake and hot spring at the foot of a glacier, 19,200 feet up in the Himalayas. But for much of its 853-mile length, it is now one of the world’s most defiled rivers. Agricultural demand repeatedly depletes the river’s flow. Rapid modernization of the Indian economy since the 1980s has added thousands of manufacturing plants to the Yamuna’s watershed, with little thought given to how much water they take out or how much pollution they add back. And urbanization has roughly quintupled the population of New Delhi, from about 3.5 million people 30 years ago to more than 18 million today.

In some places, the Yamuna is now so heavily exploited that broad swaths of riverbed lie naked and exposed to the sun for much of the year. In other places, the river is a sudsy, listless morass of human, industrial and agricultural wastes, literally an open sewer. Given that 60 million people depend on the river for bathing and drinking water, a protest might seem inevitable.

The surprising thing, at least to untutored Western eyes, was that the leaders of the Yamuna march were not primarily political activists. They were sadhus, or holy men, devotees of the central Hindu hero and deity Krishna. They briefly shut down their temples along the river as part of the protest, and they added a colorful strand of religious belief to the familiar environmental language of oxygen content, turbidity and toxicity. When Mathura, one of the towns along the route, moved to end the blight of plastic shopping bags along the river banks, The Times of India headlined the news: “Lord Krishna’s birthplace now polythene-free.”

For Hindus, the Yamuna is not just a natural resource, but also one of the holiest rivers in India. She is a goddess, a giver of life and the chief lover of Krishna. So the protesters were motivated as much by faith as by environmental outrage. In the past they would have relied exclusively on prayers, incense and offerings of fresh flowers to practice seva, the Hindu ritual of loving service to the deity. But of necessity seva has lately also come to mean environmental action, working to restore life to a river now widely regarded as dead.

That same disorienting blend of science and religion also showed up at a January conference on the banks of the Yamuna. A collaborative effort between TERI University in New Delhi and the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, the conference brought ecologists, microbiologists, chemists and hydrologists together with spiritual leaders and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The stated purpose, according to organizers Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, co-directors of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, was to foster understanding across disciplines and to bridge the gap between studies focused exclusively on scientific issues and the broader world of societal, ethical and religious concerns. But for the Americans who attended, the surprise was how comparatively narrow that gap is, at least on the Indian side.

“Coming from America, we were all amazed at the comfort and readiness with which these scientists were willing to engage in discussions that included religion,” says one participant, David Haberman, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University Bloomington. They were also intrigued with the potential to bring about change for the Yamuna River through careful scientific research disseminated and acted on by millions of people with a powerful spiritual motivation. An inadvertent side effect was to leave some of the Americans wondering about
missed opportunities back home. That is, would environmental remedies come easier if science and religion could look beyond their differences and begin to seek common ground?

The Ecozoic

For many scientists who have lived through 30 years of American culture wars, the words religion and ecology can seem to go together about as well as a blind date between Mother Teresa and Richard Dawkins. Religious conservatives have become notorious among scientists, particularly in environmental fields, for working relentlessly to block the teaching of Darwinian evolution in public schools, for adamantly resisting efforts to promote birth control (even as the human population has doubled to 7 billion people over the past half-century) and for serving as a leading source of skepticism and obstructionism on climate change and almost every other environmental issue of the day.

The prominent evangelical and political activist Rev. Jerry Falwell, for instance, once called climate change “Satan’s attempt to redirect the church’s primary focus” from evangelism to environmentalism. His son, Rev. Jerry Falwell Jr., said environmentalism itself was an attempt to “use pseudo-science to promote political agendas,” with the aim of destroying the freedom and “economies of the Western world.” In their most deranged moments, some fundamentalists have actually seemed to welcome drought, famine, flood and other forms of environmental havoc as harbingers of the Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ.

This is the sort of thing that once led the late historian Lynn White Jr. to describe Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.” In an influential 1967 paper, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” he wrote that “by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”

But White also acknowledged that any religious faith is complex, with multiple traditions and interpretations. He regarded St. Francis of Assisi, in particular, as “the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history” and as the patron saint of ecologists for his attempt “to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation.”

Though White did not say so, Christianity also inadvertently produced the West’s greatest scientific revolutionary. The natural theology movement of the early 19th century popularized the idea that nature revealed the divine hand of the Creator and that naturalists came closer to God by providing detailed scientific descriptions of how species were perfectly adapted to their habitats. One young reader would later rank *Natural Theology* by Rev. William Paley together with the works of Euclid above all others “in the education of my mind.” The student who thus learned the critical importance of studying minute variations in nature was Charles Darwin.

But these instances of religiously instigated environmentalism in the past were clearly exceptional. Is there any reason to rethink scientific attitudes toward religion now? That is, does religion have anything to add to the search for environmental solutions, whether in India or the United States? “Religions have been late to this,” says Tucker. “We often say religions have problems and promise. Everybody realizes there’s a problematic side, the fundamentalist side,
the narrow-minded side.” But religions have also been a powerful force behind some of the great reform movements of the past—for instance, the drive by Quakers and other religious groups to abolish slavery, Mahatma Gandhi’s long struggle to win India’s freedom from British colonial rule and the campaign by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other religious leaders during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From a purely practical view, Tucker adds, religions “are the largest NGOs in the world, and people have to understand that you can’t just ignore them.”

Moreover, neither scientists nor religious believers are as simple, or as mutually antagonistic, as sometimes supposed. Commonplace notions about fundamentalist and other religious attitudes can border on caricature (or perhaps a hijacking of the religious identity by one end of the political spectrum). So it can be tempting, for instance, to just ignore the Evangelical Environmental Network’s Creation Care Blog, which is rooted firmly in the Bible. And yet writers there can sound as alarmed as any Greenpeace activist about climate change and other issues. One recent entry: “I’m not so prescient as to suggest that there will be environmental martyrdom, mass civil disobedience or game-changing arrests. But laying down our lives has got to mean something. Doesn’t it?” Among white evangelicals in the United States overall, 73 percent actually favor tougher environmental laws and regulations, according to a 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Among scientists, meanwhile, Pew reported in 2009 that just over half say they believe in God or some form of higher power.

Even so, it takes a certain daring to bridge the chasm that has opened up between religion and science in America—and even more so for institutions on “opposite” sides to collaborate, as Yale’s Divinity School and F&ES have done for the past five years. The two schools now jointly host the Forum on Religion and Ecology and also offer a combined master’s degree program.

“I live in the state of Indiana,” says Haberman, “and I can assure you that Purdue University’s Department of Forestry & Natural Resources would never, ever do that: ‘How could religion have anything useful to say in environmental studies?’” (The Purdue department confirms that no such collaboration exists: “We’re very traditional.”) And yet, Haberman continues, “Yale has said, ‘Hmm, not only is the pairing of religion and environmental studies interesting, but let’s turn it into a joint-degree program.’ I can’t think of another school that has taken it that seriously.”

For Yale, the collaboration has roots in a long-standing search to address “one of the great failings of environmentalism in our country,” says Gus Speth, the former F&ES dean who brought the Forum on Religion and Ecology to the university in 2006. The green movement never really developed the ethical and spiritual dimension of environmental concern,” he says. “We had run on the political capital that catalyzed action in the late 1960s, but that had been largely exhausted by the 1980s. Unless there were huge moral and ethical sentiments that could be mobilized, we were unlikely to achieve the long-term transformation that was needed.” So when the opportunity arose to bring Tucker and Grim to Yale, Speth grabbed it, “motivated by the fact that they have been leaders in explaining the links between environment and ecology and the world’s great religions.” Funding came from the V. Kann Rasmussen and Germeshausen foundations and the Kendeda Sustainability Fund. The V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation has also supported annual student exchanges between TERI University and Yale.
Tucker and Grim, who hold faculty appointments at both F&ES and the Divinity School, walk a fine line in describing their work. They are not “eco-theologians,” and words like “activist” can raise eyebrows in an academic context, says Grim. “At the same time, Mary Evelyn and I are not keen to just stand on the edge and watch these problems carry us away.” What they do, he says, is “engaged scholarship,” based largely in the traditional academic field of religious studies. (Tucker specializes in Asian cultures, Grim in American Indians.) They work with all shades of religious belief, looking to find room for agreement among skeptical scientists, politically minded environmentalists, New Age spiritualists and traditional religious groups pushing back against any hint of pantheism or nature worship.

Though the study of religion and ecology is now popular enough to sustain two scholarly journals, it began to emerge as a separate academic discipline only about 20 years ago. Steven Rockefeller, then a professor of religion at Middlebury College, sponsored an influential conference, leading to a book, Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue, and a PBS documentary with Bill Moyers, Spirit and Nature. From there, the discipline took shape around a series of conferences Tucker and Grim organized through Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions, from which they edited the 10-volume Religions of the World and Ecology series.

Tucker and Grim were strongly influenced by Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and scholar of world religions, who was then reaching new audiences with books like The Dream of the Earth and The Universe Story, co-authored with Brian Swimme, which made a cosmological case for the value of the natural world, both for its own sake and as the essential fabric of human well-being. “What humans do to the outer world they do to their own interior world,” they wrote, and with the loss of diversity and abundance, our species “finds itself impoverished in its economic resources, in its imaginative powers, in its human sensibilities and in significant aspects of its intellectual intuitions.”

Berry’s vision was not as pessimistic as it sounds, according to Tucker and Grim, who met and married while studying with him at Fordham University. He believed in the power of religions and cultures to help people place themselves in the world. “With a story, people can endure catastrophe,” Berry used to tell them. “And with a story, they can change their lot.” What was needed, he thought, was for the story provided by religion and culture to adapt to the changing world. Rather than leave his audiences in despair over the dire state of “the Anthropocene,” as our present epoch of human domination over nature has become known, he foresaw the rise of “the Ecozoic,” what Tucker and Grim describe as “that emerging period in which humans would recover their creative orientation to the Earth community.”

Religion as a Pragmatic Tool

And yet there are few places on Earth with as rich a cultural and religious story about the natural world as India. It’s also a story that might seem particularly suited to getting the environmental answers right: In place of Judeo-Christian ideas about man’s “dominion over nature,” Hinduism and Buddhism both regard humans as more integrated into nature through karma. And while some traditional religious groups in the West tremble at any hint of pantheism, Hindus see God in the world around them and freely worship trees, animals and especially rivers. (Hinduism actually ranks a monkey, Hanuman, in its pantheon of deities and has no problem with
Darwinian evolution being taught in schools.) So why didn’t this religious tradition prevent environmental catastrophe in the first place on the Yamuna? And why should anyone expect the combination of science and religious faith to work there now?

What happened to the Yamuna “was essentially the result of isolated actions, which were not connected,” says Rajendra Pachauri, who is director-general and chancellor of TERI University and director of Yale’s Climate and Energy Institute. The river seemed relatively healthy when he first moved to New Delhi almost 30 years ago. “People were swimming in the river. You could drink the water.” But the condition of the Yamuna deteriorated rapidly from that point as India began to modernize. “There was clearly a lack of coordination, a lack of information and perhaps an ignorance of the aggregate impacts. But now there is no such excuse. Now we see the collective impact of what happened.”

The condition of the river is so dire that it has become impossible for anyone to ignore. The problems fall into five broad categories:

- Lack of flow due to dams and heavy withdrawals for agricultural irrigation and other purposes (at Delhi, where pollution authorities say the flow should be at least 285 cubic meters per second, it drops down in summer months to as little as 5 cubic meters per second)
- Contamination of the river with agricultural pesticides and herbicides
- Toxic industrial wastes
- Human wastes, with more than half the sewage in Delhi entering the river untreated and fecal coliform counts in places reaching over 100,000 per 100 milliliters (200 times the standard for water to be swimmable)
- And in the face of global warming the uncertain future of the dwindling Himalayan glaciers that are the source of the river

Pachauri, who advised the organizers of the January Yale-TERI conference, is primarily a scientist, trained in industrial engineering. In his view religion is less important than the combination of science and popular protest that he feels it will take to fix the Yamuna. He notes that many rivers in the United States were also dead 40 years ago. But lobbying by early environmentalists led to massive federal and state clean-water initiatives and a rapid recovery of many waterways.

In India, two costly attempts to clean up the river, the Yamuna Action Plan (or YAP) in 1993 and YAP II in 2004, have failed to produce improvements. Both suffered, according to Pachauri, from a lack of enforcement of existing regulations and overall “inept management.” But as politicians begin to recognize “the seething anger and level of disgust on the part of the people,” he believes they will have no choice but to respond more seriously—if only to avoid the turmoil of recent political uprisings in the Middle East.

Religion could serve as a pragmatic tool for bringing that anger to bear on policymakers, according to Nandini Kumar, a chemist at TERI, who also attended the January conference. Too many people have become politicians, she says, “because they want the status, the money, rather than because they have a vision of India. If we want to change the politicians, we have to tie what we do to a ‘vote bank’,” a term coined in India for a bloc of voters from a unified
community. “If we use the religious angle to tell people they should be angry about the river, and these people rally and go out and say, ‘Look, if you don’t fix this we’re not going to vote for you,’ then politicians will respond.”

But some skeptics argue that this pragmatic approach is one reason Hinduism failed to protect the Yamuna in the first place. Environmentalists often romanticize Eastern religions as more environmentally friendly, assuming some past “eco-golden age,” writes Emma Tomalin, a religious studies lecturer at the University of Leeds. But unlike the largely Western phenomenon of religious environmentalism, the “nature religion” of Hinduism is merely the worship of elements of the natural world, she argues, “most often with no basis in the ideas and values of contemporary environmentalist thinking.” The idea that a river goddess “can carry away impurities—both spiritual and physical—may actually act as an impediment,” encouraging people to continue treating the river as a dumping ground. In the “empty belly” politics of India’s poor, questions of survival and the tantalizing promise of prosperity can also easily trump environmental or religious considerations. Thus India’s first prime minister after independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, was able to deftly co-opt river worship by describing the big dam projects he espoused as “the temples of a modern India.”

Tomalin is right about the tendency to romanticize the religions of both Asians and Native Americans, says David Haberman, whose 2006 book, River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India, explores the intersection of religion, science and environmentalism with the Yamuna. She’s also right in saying that “nature worship doesn’t necessarily translate into environmentalism.” But she goes too far in ignoring its potential to do so. Like Christianity, Hinduism has multiple traditions and interpretations. The tendency of British colonialists in India, he says, was to reduce Hinduism to “an ascetic, world-renouncing tradition.” But that meant carefully ignoring the equally rich world-affirming attitudes embodied in such influential texts as the Bhagavad-Gita: “The Victorians misinterpreted us,” says a character in the 1935 novel, Untouchable, by Mulk Raj Anand. “It was as if, in order to give a philosophical background to their exploitation of India, they ingeniously concocted a nice little fairy story: ‘You don’t believe in this world; to you all this is maya (illusion). Let us look after your country for you and you can dedicate yourself to achieving Nirvana.’”

Among believers on the banks of the Yamuna now, the reality is that most fit into three broad categories, Haberman says: Some think that because the river is a goddess, she can never be polluted, no matter how physically defiled. Others believe that the pollution can harm creatures that depend on the river for survival, but not the goddess herself. And a third group believes the goddess herself is dying and in need of their help.

The creatures that depend on the river are clearly in trouble. The big river turtles that carry the goddess Yamuna in religious imagery have now largely vanished, and no one really knows the status of bird species that depend on the river. Aquatic life has also suffered and, according to India Today, 500 river villages that were largely based on fishing in the 1970s must now earn their livelihood by other means. The effects of the river’s pollution on human health, though also inadequately studied, include a sharp spike in cases of hepatitis A and typhoid fever, according to recent work in New Delhi. Reliance on polluted river water is also a major factor in India’s high infant mortality rate—more than 50 deaths per 1,000 births, compared to 6.8 in the United States. Pollution of the Yamuna could also have public health consequences worldwide. In April
an article in the British medical journal The Lancet warned that bacteria in New Delhi drinking water carry a gene, NDM-1 (New Delhi metallobetalactamase), for an enzyme that conveys resistance to almost all known antibiotics. Resistant bacteria turned up “in public water used for drinking, washing and food preparation and also in pools and rivulets in heavily populated areas where children play,” according to lead author Tim Walsh of Cardiff University. An estimated 500,000 people in New Delhi now carry resistant bacteria, which have also appeared in Europe, North America and other parts of Asia. Medical authorities worry that the rapid spread of this form of resistance could imperil all kinds of routine medical procedures that depend on the ability to treat infections. “If resistance destroys that ability,” British health official David Livermore told The Wall Street Journal, “then the whole edifice of modern medicine crumbles.”

But along the banks of the Yamuna, what seems to rankle most, at least for now, is the desecration of the goddess herself. In his book, Haberman tells the story of Gopeshwar Nath Chaturvedi, from a priestly family in Mathura. His transformation took place in 1985, when he brought a group of pilgrims to the main site in Mathura for worshipping the Yamuna and found the river discolored with red and green dyes, dead fish clotting the surface and dogs gathering to scabble over the carcasses. “All the water coming to Mathura was sewage,” Chaturvedi realized. “And this is what we are worshipping. It makes me feel bad!” His religion taught him that he was a son of the river, he told Haberman, and “when Mother is sick, one cannot throw her out of the house. We must help her. Therefore, I do Yamuna seva.” Since 1985, his seva has consisted of repeatedly filing lawsuits aimed at restoring the river to health.

That embattled approach is increasingly common among believers, particularly in Braj Mandal, the area below New Delhi that is both the holiest—and most polluted—section of the Yamuna. (On government maps, it’s often referred to as “the eutrophicated segment.”) The river is so visibly filthy there that most temples now use bottled water for the daily bathing of statues. In some areas they have no choice: at Gokul, construction of a dam means there’s no longer any river water in front of the temples for ritual bathing by pilgrims. At Vrindavan, religious leaders have had to fight, so far successfully, against efforts to build a highway directly over the surface of the Yamuna.

Science can help provide these religious leaders with the evidence they need to save the river, says John Grim. The ambition is to build a dialogue, with students taking the time, as they monitor water quality, to explain their work to priests in the temples, and vice versa: “What does the river mean to you? And what does it mean if you take statues into the river to wash them?” Students bring those issues to the fore: ‘Can we assume the river is purifying if it’s polluted?’ Science is also the best tool for clarifying the unseen ways the river affects pilgrims who come to the river—for instance, with diseases like dengue fever, from mosquitoes breeding in stagnant water.

For Haberman, the struggle for the soul of religion—all religions, really—has to do with whether they continue to stand by as the world collapses around them or shift course to focus on stewardship, the idea that “the world was given as a gift of God” and that we are not its owners, but its caretakers. It has to do with whether science and religion can set aside their mutual suspicion and learn to collaborate.
“How that’s going to play out remains to be seen,” he says. “But the whole world has something at stake now in that conflict.”

http://environment.yale.edu/magazine/spring2011/the-yamuna-river-indias-dying-goddess/

May 24, 2011

Uganda religious leaders act on deforestation

By Pius Sawa
Alertnet

KAMPALA, Uganda (AlertNet) – When Anglican bishop Nathan Kyamanywa was appointed to his job in 2002, he decided that climate change should be a matter of concern for Christians. Kyamanywa bought 55 tree seedlings and gave one to each of the parishes in his diocese of Bunyoro-Kitara in western Uganda.

“My fellow bishops laughed at me. They thought I wanted to impress the public. But I can tell you, the tree planting has never stopped since I started,” said Kyamanywa.

The bishop is just one of a number of Ugandan religious leaders from various faiths who are educating their communities about the environment and taking steps to preserve it, particularly in the face of deforestation.

Uganda has lost more than two-thirds of its forests over the last 20 years as its population quickly expands and as access to electricity and other power sources except wood and charcoal remains low.

In addition, the north of the country saw many trees cut down by government forces during a 20-year civil war against the Lord’s Resistance Army, as the government sought to deprive the rebels of hiding places.

The widespread deforestation has made land across Uganda more vulnerable to climate-linked extreme weather, including droughts and floods. That worries a growing number of the country’s church leaders, who are now working to protect and expand the country’s remaining forests and protect the lives and livelihoods of their congregations.

Many religious groups are carrying out the planting efforts on large chunks of land they own, which have suffered forest losses to charcoal production, farming and other development. Others are helping members plant trees on their own land.

“In central Kampala, we have more than 1,000 hectares of land that we have planted (with) trees, and in the next few years the church will start harvesting timber from pine as we protect our nature,” said pastor Godrey Lubwama of Uganda’s Seventh-Day Adventist church.
The church provides its employees with three-quarters of the capital needed to plant their own trees, and gives free seedlings to church members, ranging from fruit trees to cash crops such as coffee. Lubwama says this empowers church members economically while protecting the earth. The church’s one condition is that a tithe is given back to the church.

“When we give you ten seedlings, one is for the church,” he said.

Bishop Kyamanywa has taken his climate advocacy work a step further, making an energy-saving stove for his house. His example has influenced members of other dioceses to do the same.

“Climate change is our problem. When we sink we sink together and when we float we float together,” Kyamanywa said.

Kyamanywa’s efforts have been recognised by the British Council in Uganda, which has named him a “climate change icon.” Another religious figure similarly recognised for his advocacy concerning climate change is Muslim leader Imam Kasozi.

Kasozi has long been engaged with the Green Top Project, a secular organization that produces tree seedlings that are then given out free to communities, schools and mosques. The project integrates training for youths and elders from communities across the country on the need to combat the impacts of climate change.

Kasozi has donated more than 60,000 seedlings through the project, and since 2009 he has visited most regions of Uganda, speaking on climate change each month at mosques.

The imam has established a savings scheme to fund community development projects. Under the terms of the scheme, called Mia Mia or Kikumi Kikumi (Swahili and Luganda words meaning “one hundred one hundred”), each member of an established community group contributes 100 Ugandan shillings (about five U.S. cents) each day. This money is then pooled to purchase seedlings.

“If you have a group of 50 people ... you can raise 5,000 shillings each day, enough to buy 25 seedlings. This is the best way of saving our motherland from desertification,” Kasozi said.

Reducing deforestation in Uganda also means finding other ways to manage energy needs. Childcare Kitgum Servants, a Christian NGO that cares for more than 7,000 war orphans, was challenged by a donor to find a more efficient way of cooking food than using wood-burning stoves.

“We used to buy a lot of wood for firewood and we realized that we were damaging our earth by clearing the trees,” said pastor Alfred Komagum.

The organisation’s leaders travelled to Rwanda to see how biogas was being generated from human waste.
“We visited one of the biggest prisons in Rwanda, and here human waste was being diverted back into the kitchen as biogas for cooking. We came back with the idea and now we are producing (biogas) energy for the orphanage,” said Komagum.

Other religious groups are following a similar path. The Roman Catholic Church, through its charity organization Caritas Uganda, for instance, is providing communities with seedlings to plant a variety of species including fruit trees.

“The challenge is big but we are doing well in this,” said Rev. Seraphine Opio of Gulu diocese.

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http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/uganda-religious-leaders-act-on-deforestation

May 26, 2011

The Anthropocene: A man-made world

Science is recognising humans as a geological force to be reckoned with

The Economist

THE here and now are defined by astronomy and geology. Astronomy takes care of the here: a planet orbiting a yellow star embedded in one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way, a galaxy that is itself part of the Virgo supercluster, one of millions of similarly vast entities dotted through the sky. Geology deals with the now: the 10,000-year-old Holocene epoch, a peculiarly stable and clement part of the Quaternary period, a time distinguished by regular shifts into and out of ice ages. The Quaternary forms part of the 65m-year Cenozoic era, distinguished by the opening of the North Atlantic, the rise of the Himalayas, and the widespread presence of mammals and flowering plants. This era in turn marks the most recent part of the Phanerozoic aeon, the 540m-year chunk of the Earth’s history wherein rocks with fossils of complex organisms can be found. The regularity of celestial clockwork and the solid probity of rock give these co-ordinates a reassuring constancy.

Now there is a movement afoot to change humanity’s co-ordinates. In 2000 Paul Crutzen, an eminent atmospheric chemist, realised he no longer believed he was living in the Holocene. He was living in some other age, one shaped primarily by people. From their trawlers scraping the floors of the seas to their dams impounding sediment by the gigatonne, from their stripping of forests to their irrigation of farms, from their mile-deep mines to their melting of glaciers, humans were bringing about an age of planetary change. With a colleague, Eugene Stoermer, Dr Crutzen suggested this age be called the Anthropocene—“the recent age of man”.

The term has slowly picked up steam, both within the sciences (the International Commission on Stratigraphy, ultimate adjudicator of the geological time scale, is taking a formal interest) and beyond. This May statements on the environment by concerned Nobel laureates and the
Pontifical Academy of Sciences both made prominent use of the term, capitalising on the way in which it dramatises the sheer scale of human activity.

The advent of the Anthropocene promises more, though, than a scientific nicety or a new way of grabbing the eco-jaded public’s attention. The term “paradigm shift” is bandied around with promiscuous ease. But for the natural sciences to make human activity central to its conception of the world, rather than a distraction, would mark such a shift for real. For centuries, science has progressed by making people peripheral. In the 16th century Nicolaus Copernicus moved the Earth from its privileged position at the centre of the universe. In the 18th James Hutton opened up depths of geological time that dwarf the narrow now. In the 19th Charles Darwin fitted humans onto a single twig of the evolving tree of life. As Simon Lewis, an ecologist at the University of Leeds, points out, embracing the Anthropocene as an idea means reversing this trend. It means treating humans not as insignificant observers of the natural world but as central to its workings, elemental in their force.

Sous la plage, les pavés

The most common way of distinguishing periods of geological time is by means of the fossils they contain. On this basis picking out the Anthropocene in the rocks of days to come will be pretty easy. Cities will make particularly distinctive fossils. A city on a fast-sinking river delta (and fast-sinking deltas, undermined by the pumping of groundwater and starved of sediment by dams upstream, are common Anthropocene environments) could spend millions of years buried and still, when eventually uncovered, reveal through its crushed structures and weird mixtures of materials that it is unlike anything else in the geological record.

The fossils of living creatures will be distinctive, too. Geologists define periods through assemblages of fossil life reliably found together. One of the characteristic markers of the Anthropocene will be the widespread remains of organisms that humans use, or that have adapted to life in a human-dominated world. According to studies by Erle Ellis, an ecologist at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, the vast majority of ecosystems on the planet now reflect the presence of people. There are, for instance, more trees on farms than in wild forests. And these anthropogenic biomes are spread about the planet in a way that the ecological arrangements of the prehuman world were not. The fossil record of the Anthropocene will thus show a planetary ecosystem homogenised through domestication.

More sinisterly, there are the fossils that will not be found. Although it is not yet inevitable, scientists warn that if current trends of habitat loss continue, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, there could be an imminent and dramatic number of extinctions before long.

All these things would show future geologists that humans had been present. But though they might be diagnostic of the time in which humans lived, they would not necessarily show that those humans shaped their time in the way that people pushing the idea of the Anthropocene want to argue. The strong claim of those announcing the recent dawning of the age of man is that humans are not just spreading over the planet, but are changing the way it works.

Such workings are the province of Earth-system science, which sees the planet not just as a set of places, or as the subject of a history, but also as a system of forces, flows and feedbacks that act
upon each other. This system can behave in distinctive and counterintuitive ways, including sometimes flipping suddenly from one state to another. To an Earth-system scientist the difference between the Quaternary period (which includes the Holocene) and the Neogene, which came before it, is not just what was living where, or what the sea level was; it is that in the Neogene the climate stayed stable whereas in the Quaternary it swung in and out of a series of ice ages. The Earth worked differently in the two periods.

The clearest evidence for the system working differently in the Anthropocene comes from the recycling systems on which life depends for various crucial elements. In the past couple of centuries people have released quantities of fossil carbon that the planet took hundreds of millions of years to store away. This has given them a commanding role in the planet’s carbon cycle.

Although the natural fluxes of carbon dioxide into and out of the atmosphere are still more than ten times larger than the amount that humans put in every year by burning fossil fuels, the human addition matters disproportionately because it unbalances those natural flows. As Mr Micawber wisely pointed out, a small change in income can, in the absence of a compensating change in outlays, have a disastrous effect. The result of putting more carbon into the atmosphere than can be taken out of it is a warmer climate, a melting Arctic, higher sea levels, improvements in the photosynthetic efficiency of many plants, an intensification of the hydrologic cycle of evaporation and precipitation, and new ocean chemistry.

All of these have knock-on effects both on people and on the processes of the planet. More rain means more weathering of mountains. More efficient photosynthesis means less evaporation from croplands. And the changes in ocean chemistry are the sort of thing that can be expected to have a direct effect on the geological record if carbon levels rise far enough.

At a recent meeting of the Geological Society of London that was devoted to thinking about the Anthropocene and its geological record, Toby Tyrrell of the University of Southampton pointed out that pale carbonate sediments—limestones, chalks and the like—cannot be laid down below what is called a “carbonate compensation depth”. And changes in chemistry brought about by the fossil-fuel carbon now accumulating in the ocean will raise the carbonate compensation depth, rather as a warmer atmosphere raises the snowline on mountains. Some ocean floors which are shallow enough for carbonates to precipitate out as sediment in current conditions will be out of the game when the compensation depth has risen, like ski resorts too low on a warming alp. New carbonates will no longer be laid down. Old ones will dissolve. This change in patterns of deep-ocean sedimentation will result in a curious, dark band of carbonate-free rock—rather like that which is seen in sediments from the Palaeocene-Eocene thermal maximum, an episode of severe greenhouse warming brought on by the release of pent-up carbon 56m years ago.

The fix is in

No Dickensian insights are necessary to appreciate the scale of human intervention in the nitrogen cycle. One crucial part of this cycle—the fixing of pure nitrogen from the atmosphere into useful nitrogen-containing chemicals—depends more or less entirely on living things (lightning helps a bit). And the living things doing most of that work are now people (see chart). By adding industrial clout to the efforts of the microbes that used to do the job single-handed,
humans have increased the annual amount of nitrogen fixed on land by more than 150%. Some of this is accidental. Burning fossil fuels tends to oxidise nitrogen at the same time. The majority is done on purpose, mostly to make fertilisers. This has a variety of unwholesome consequences, most importantly the increasing number of coastal “dead zones” caused by algal blooms feeding on fertiliser-rich run-off waters.

Industrial nitrogen’s greatest environmental impact, though, is to increase the number of people. Although nitrogen fixation is not just a gift of life—it has been estimated that 100m people were killed by explosives made with industrially fixed nitrogen in the 20th century’s wars—its net effect has been to allow a huge growth in population. About 40% of the nitrogen in the protein that humans eat today got into that food by way of artificial fertiliser. There would be nowhere near as many people doing all sorts of other things to the planet if humans had not sped the nitrogen cycle up.

It is also worth noting that unlike many of humanity’s other effects on the planet, the remaking of the nitrogen cycle was deliberate. In the late 19th century scientists diagnosed a shortage of nitrogen as a planet-wide problem. Knowing that natural processes would not improve the supply, they invented an artificial one, the Haber process, that could make up the difference. It was, says Mark Sutton of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Edinburgh, the first serious human attempt at geoengineering the planet to bring about a desired goal. The scale of its success outstripped the imaginings of its instigators. So did the scale of its unintended consequences.

For many of those promoting the idea of the Anthropocene, further geoengineering may now be in order, this time on the carbon front. Left to themselves, carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere are expected to remain high for 1,000 years—more, if emissions continue to go up through this century. It is increasingly common to hear climate scientists arguing that this means things should not be left to themselves—that the goal of the 21st century should be not just to stop the amount of carbon in the atmosphere increasing, but to start actively decreasing it. This might be done in part by growing forests (see [article](#)) and enriching soils, but it might also need more high-tech interventions, such as burning newly grown plant matter in power stations and pumping the resulting carbon dioxide into aquifers below the surface, or scrubbing the air with newly contrived chemical-engineering plants, or intervening in ocean chemistry in ways that would increase the sea’s appetite for the air’s carbon.

To think of deliberately interfering in the Earth system will undoubtedly be alarming to some. But so will an Anthropocene deprived of such deliberation. A way to try and split the difference has been propounded by a group of Earth-system scientists inspired by (and including) Dr Crutzen under the banner of “planetary boundaries”. The planetary-boundaries group, which published a sort of manifesto in 2009, argues for increased restraint and, where necessary, direct intervention aimed at bringing all sorts of things in the Earth system, from the alkalinity of the oceans to the rate of phosphate run-off from the land, close to the conditions pertaining in the Holocene. Carbon-dioxide levels, the researchers recommend, should be brought back from whatever they peak at to a level a little higher than the Holocene’s and a little lower than today’s.
The idea behind this precautionary approach is not simply that things were good the way they were. It is that the further the Earth system gets from the stable conditions of the Holocene, the more likely it is to slip into a whole new state and change itself yet further.

The Earth’s history shows that the planet can indeed tip from one state to another, amplifying the sometimes modest changes which trigger the transition. The nightmare would be a flip to some permanently altered state much further from the Holocene than things are today: a hotter world with much less productive oceans, for example. Such things cannot be ruled out. On the other hand, the invocation of poorly defined tipping points is a well worn rhetorical trick for stirring the fears of people unperturbed by current, relatively modest, changes.

In general, the goal of staying at or returning close to Holocene conditions seems judicious. It remains to be seen if it is practical. The Holocene never supported a civilisation of 10 billion reasonably rich people, as the Anthropocene must seek to do, and there is no proof that such a population can fit into a planetary pot so circumscribed. So it may be that a “good Anthropocene”, stable and productive for humans and other species they rely on, is one in which some aspects of the Earth system’s behaviour are lastingly changed. For example, the Holocene would, without human intervention, have eventually come to an end in a new ice age. Keeping the Anthropocene free of ice ages will probably strike most people as a good idea.

**Dreams of a smart planet**

That is an extreme example, though. No new ice age is due for some millennia to come. Nevertheless, to see the Anthropocene as a blip that can be minimised, and from which the planet, and its people, can simply revert to the status quo, may be to underestimate the sheer scale of what is going on.

Take energy. At the moment the amount of energy people use is part of what makes the Anthropocene problematic, because of the carbon dioxide given off. That problem will not be solved soon enough to avert significant climate change unless the Earth system is a lot less prone to climate change than most scientists think. But that does not mean it will not be solved at all. And some of the zero-carbon energy systems that solve it—continent-scale electric grids distributing solar energy collected in deserts, perhaps, or advanced nuclear power of some sort—could, in time, be scaled up to provide much more energy than today’s power systems do. As much as 100 clean terawatts, compared to today’s dirty 15TW, is not inconceivable for the 22nd century. That would mean humanity was producing roughly as much useful energy as all the world’s photosynthesis combined.

In a fascinating recent book, “Revolutions that Made the Earth”, Timothy Lenton and Andrew Watson, Earth-system scientists at the universities of Exeter and East Anglia respectively, argue that large changes in the amount of energy available to the biosphere have, in the past, always marked large transitions in the way the world works. They have a particular interest in the jumps in the level of atmospheric oxygen seen about 2.4 billion years ago and 600m years ago. Because oxygen is a particularly good way of getting energy out of organic matter (if it weren’t, there would be no point in breathing) these shifts increased sharply the amount of energy available to the Earth’s living things. That may well be why both of those jumps seem to be associated with subsequent evolutionary leaps—the advent of complex cells, in the first place, and of large
animals, in the second. Though the details of those links are hazy, there is no doubt that in their aftermath the rules by which the Earth system operated had changed.

The growing availability of solar or nuclear energy over the coming centuries could mark the greatest new energy resource since the second of those planetary oxidations, 600m years ago—a change in the same class as the greatest the Earth system has ever seen. Dr Lenton (who is also one of the creators of the planetary-boundaries concept) and Dr Watson suggest that energy might be used to change the hydrologic cycle with massive desalination equipment, or to speed up the carbon cycle by drawing down atmospheric carbon dioxide, or to drive new recycling systems devoted to tin and copper and the many other metals as vital to industrial life as carbon and nitrogen are to living tissue. Better to embrace the Anthropocene’s potential as a revolution in the way the Earth system works, they argue, than to try to retreat onto a low-impact path that runs the risk of global immiseration.

Such a choice is possible because of the most fundamental change in Earth history that the Anthropocene marks: the emergence of a form of intelligence that allows new ways of being to be imagined and, through co-operation and innovation, to be achieved. The lessons of science, from Copernicus to Darwin, encourage people to dismiss such special pleading. So do all manner of cultural warnings, from the hubris around which Greek tragedies are built to the lamentation of King David’s preacher: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity…the Earth abideth for ever…and there is no new thing under the sun.” But the lamentation of vanity can be false modesty. On a planetary scale, intelligence is something genuinely new and powerful. Through the domestication of plants and animals intelligence has remade the living environment. Through industry it has disrupted the key biogeochemical cycles. For good or ill, it will do yet more.

It may seem nonsense to think of the (probably sceptical) intelligence with which you interpret these words as something on a par with plate tectonics or photosynthesis. But dam by dam, mine by mine, farm by farm and city by city it is remaking the Earth before your eyes.


May 29, 2011

Are You Ready for More?

In a world of climate change, freak storms are the new normal. Why we’re unprepared for the harrowing future.

By Sharon Begley
Newsweek

Joplin, Mo., was prepared. The tornado warning system gave residents 24 minutes’ notice that a twister was bearing down on them. Doctors and nurses at St. John’s Regional Medical Center, who had practiced tornado drills for years, moved fast, getting patients away from windows, closing blinds, and activating emergency generators. And yet more than 130 people died in
Joplin, including four people at St. John’s, where the tornado sucked up the roof and left the building in ruins, like much of the shattered city.

Even those who deny the existence of global climate change are having trouble dismissing the evidence of the last year. In the U.S. alone, nearly 1,000 tornadoes have ripped across the heartland, killing more than 500 people and inflicting $9 billion in damage. The Midwest suffered the wettest April in 116 years, forcing the Mississippi to flood thousands of square miles, even as drought-plagued Texas suffered the driest month in a century. Worldwide, the litany of weather’s extremes has reached biblical proportions. The 2010 heat wave in Russia killed an estimated 15,000 people. Floods in Australia and Pakistan killed 2,000 and left large swaths of each country under water. A months-long drought in China has devastated millions of acres of farmland. And the temperature keeps rising: 2010 was the hottest year on earth since weather records began.

From these and other extreme-weather events, one lesson is sinking in with terrifying certainty. The stable climate of the last 12,000 years is gone. Which means you haven’t seen anything yet. And we are not prepared.

Picture California a few decades from now, a place so hot and arid the state’s trademark orange and lemon trees have been replaced with olive trees that can handle the new climate. Alternating floods and droughts have made it impossible for the reservoirs to capture enough drinking water. The picturesque Highway 1, sections of which are already periodically being washed out by storm surges and mudslides, will have to be rerouted inland, possibly through a mountain. These aren’t scenes from another deadly-weather thriller like The Day After Tomorrow. They’re all changes that California officials believe they need to brace for within the next decade or two. And they aren’t alone. Across the U.S., it’s just beginning to dawn on civic leaders that they’ll need to help their communities brave coming dangers brought by climate change, from disappearing islands in Chesapeake Bay to dust bowls in the Plains and horrific hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. Yet only 14 states are even planning, let alone implementing, climate-change adaptation plans, says Terri Cruce, a climate consultant in California. The other 36 apparently are hoping for a miracle.

The game of catch-up will have to happen quickly because so much time was lost to inaction. “The Bush administration was a disaster, but the Obama administration has accomplished next to nothing either, in part because a significant part of the Democratic Party is inclined to balk on this issue as well,” says economist Jeffrey Sachs, head of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. “We [are] past the tipping point.” The idea of adapting to climate change was once a taboo subject. Scientists and activists feared that focusing on coping would diminish efforts to reduce carbon emissions. On the opposite side of the divide, climate-change deniers argued that since global warming is a “hoax,” there was no need to figure out how to adapt. “Climate-change adaptation was a nonstarter,” says Vicki Arroyo, executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center. “If you wanted to talk about that, you would have had to talk about climate change itself, which the Bush administration didn’t want to do.” In fact, President Bush killed what author Mark Hertsgaard in his 2011 book, Hot, calls “a key adaptation tool,” the National Climate Assessment, an analysis of the vulnerabilities in regions of the U.S. and ideas for coping with them. The legacy of that: state efforts are spotty and local action is practically nonexistent.
“There are no true adaptation experts in the federal government, let alone states or cities,” says Arroyo. “They’ve just been commandeered from other departments.”

The rookies will struggle to comprehend the complex impacts of climate change. The burning of fossil fuels has raised atmospheric levels of heat-trapping carbon dioxide by 40 percent above what they were before the Industrial Revolution. The added heat in the atmosphere retains more moisture, ratchets up the energy in the system, and incites more violent and extreme weather. Scientists disagree about whether climate change will bring more intense or frequent tornadoes, but there is wide consensus that the 2 degrees Fahrenheit of global warming of the last century is behind the rise in sea levels, more intense hurricanes, more heat waves, and more droughts and deluges. Even if the world went carbon-neutral tomorrow, we’d be in for more: because of the CO2 that has already been emitted, we’re on track for another 5 degrees of warming. Batten down the hatches. “You can no longer say that the climate of the future is going to be like the climate of today, let alone yesterday,” says Judi Greenwald, vice president of innovative solutions at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. “In all of the plausible climate scenarios, we are going to have to change the way we do things in ways we can’t even predict.”

Changing temperatures will have a profound effect on the plants and animals among us. Crops that flourished in the old climate regime will have to adapt to the new one, as some pests are already doing. Tropical diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and yellow fever are reaching temperate regions, and ragweed and poison ivy thrive in the hothouse world. Yet most of us are naive about what climate-change adaptation will entail. At the benign extreme, “adapting” sounds as easy as home gardeners adjusting to their new climate zones—those colorful bands on the back of the package of zinnia seeds. It sounds as pleasant as cities planting more trees, as Chicago, New York, Boston, and scores of others are doing (with species native to the warmer climes: Chicago is subbing heat-loving sweet gum and swamp oak for the traditional white oak). And it sounds as architecturally interesting as changing roofs: New York, which is looking at an average temperature increase of up to 3 degrees Fahrenheit by 2020, is planning to paint 3 million square feet of roofs white, to reflect sunlight and thus reduce urban heat-island effects.

But those steps don’t even hint at how disruptive and expensive climate-change adaptation will be. “Ten years ago, when we thought climate change would be slow and linear, you could get away with thinking that ‘adaptation’ meant putting in permeable pavement” so that storm water would be absorbed rather than cause floods, says Bill McKibben, author of the 2010 book *Eaarth*. “Now it’s clear that’s not going to be at all sufficient, as we see already with disruptions in our ability to grow food, an increase in storms, and the accelerated melting of Greenland that could raise sea levels six feet. Adaptation is going to have to be a lot more than changing which trees cities plant.”

As tomorrow’s climate wreaks havoc on agriculture—this spring’s deluges have already kept farmers from getting tractors into fields to plant corn—McKibben foresees tens of thousands more Americans having to work on farms, since human hands can do what machines cannot, like planting seeds in flooded fields. Until now, maximizing yield has been the agricultural imperative, but in the future, stability and resilience will be more important. In much of the Northeast, farmers will be unable to grow popular varieties of apples, blueberries, and cranberries, for instance; in Vermont, maple sugaring will likely go the way of ox-drawn plows.
States and cities will have to make huge investments in infrastructure to handle the encroaching sea and raging rivers. Keene, N.H., for instance, has been a pioneer in climate-change adaptation, says Missy Stults, climate director of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA. The city recently enlarged culverts along its highways so storm runoff would be less likely to wash out roads. In the San Francisco Bay area, planners are considering increasing the height of the seawall on the city’s waterfront and the levees at the San Francisco and Oakland airports. In Ventura, Calif., construction crews moved Surfer’s Point 65 feet inland, the state’s first experiment in “managed retreat.” Because warmer air provides less lift, airport runways the world over will have to be lengthened in order for planes to take off.

In Norfolk, Va., where the combination of global sea-level rise and local-land subsidence has brought water levels 13.5 inches higher since 1930, the city has fought a battle to stay ahead of the tide by elevating one often-flooded roadway by 18 inches. But the neighborhood may have to be abandoned—and residents may not be much happier in neighboring parts of Maryland. An expected sea-level rise there of twice the global average means that 371 miles of highway are at risk of looking more like canals, while 2,500 historic and archeological sites could become real-life versions of Atlantis. Thousands of septic systems—5,200 in a single county near Chesapeake Bay—are in flood zones, says Zoe Johnson, who directs the climate-change adaptation program at the Department of Natural Resources.

Already, 13 islands in the bay are submerged, 400,000 acres on the eastern shore are on the way to joining them, and 580 acres of shoreline are lost every year as intense storms erode beaches and wetlands. Homeowners can no longer automatically get a permit to “harden” their beaches by erecting bulkheads and sea walls; they must instead plant vegetation, which may not do the trick. “It’s inevitable that some of our low-lying communities will need to be relocated or abandoned,” says Johnson.

Maryland is not the only place that will have to decide which communities it can afford to protect and which will have to be sacrificed. Environmental scientist Thomas Wilbanks of Oak Ridge National Laboratory, who chaired a 2011 panel of the National Research Council on adapting to climate change, says: “We’ll identify places with iconic value and protect them whatever the cost, even if that means Miami and New Orleans become islands” as surrounding communities are sacrificed. Given that Manhattan is already an island, architects asked to imagine its future have gone a step further: designing Venice-like canals for the southern tip.

In Alaska, six indigenous villages on the coast, including Newtok and Shishmaref, are likely to get swamped as seas rise and storm surges intensify, says Gary Kofinas of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. They also sit on permafrost, which isn’t “perma” anymore. As the ground melts beneath the villages, the state is figuring out how and where to relocate them. Around the world, nearly 1 billion people live in low-lying river deltas, from Guangzhou to New Orleans, that will be reclaimed by the sea, forcing tens of millions of people to migrate. It threatens to be a trail of human misery that will make the exodus after Hurricane Katrina look like a weekend getaway.

The U.S. could take some advice from other countries like the Netherlands, which has more than a little experience keeping the ocean at bay. The Dutch seem to understand just how radically different life will be. As part of a 200-year plan, the country has launched a €1.5 billion project
to broaden river channels so they aren’t overwhelmed as a result of the higher flows, says Pier Vellinga, professor of climate change at Wageningen University. Rotterdam raised by two feet a storm gate at the port that holds back the (rising) North Sea, and elevated the ground the new 1,700-acre port sits on by a foot and a half to keep it from being submerged, all at a cost of some €50 million. The country is also adding millions of cubic yards of sand to dunes that hold back the North Sea. All told, it will soon be spending some €4 billion a year to cope with what’s coming down the pike. Britain, too, is taking adaptation seriously, planning to raise the height of the floodgates protecting central London from the Thames by 12 inches.

So what lies behind America’s resistance to action? Economist Sachs points to the lobbying power of industries that resist acknowledgment of climate change’s impact. “The country is two decades behind in taking action because both parties are in thrall to Big Oil and Big Coal,” says Sachs. “The airwaves are filled with corporate-financed climate misinformation.” But the vanguard of action isn’t waiting any longer. This week, representatives from an estimated 100 cities are meeting in Bonn, Germany, for the 2nd World Congress on Cities and Adaptation to Climate Change. The theme is “Resilient Cities.” As Joplin, Mo., learned in the most tragic way possible, against some impacts of climate change, man’s puny efforts are futile. But time is getting short, and the stakes are high. Says Daniel Sarewitz, a professor of science and society at Arizona State University: “Not to adapt is to consign millions of people to death and disruption.”

http://www.newsweek.com/2011/05/29/are-you-ready-for-more.html

May 29, 2011

Science and Spirit Converge in the Now (Video)

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

A growing understanding of our universe reveals two remarkable dynamics at work that together intensify and expand our feeling for the spiritual nature of existence. The first dynamic is the universe story: A grand narrative that portrays humanity as descendants of a vast, creative lineage of life that stretches over nearly 14 billion years. The second dynamic is the universe emerging as a fresh creation at every moment.

While the universe story provides a stunning narrative of the "horizontal" unfolding across time, the insight of an emerging universe adds the "vertical" dimension of the universe continuously arising in time. The vertical dynamic of continuous creation slices through all that exists and reveals everything as a single orchestration happening all at once. At every moment, we are a part of this grand unity of creation.

The unfolding of the universe through time demonstrates an amazingly powerful and patient process at work. The continuous creation of the cosmos in time reveals another, stunningly powerful dynamic. When we put these two extraordinary processes together at an intersection
called "now," it reveals how we simultaneously exist in a place of both creative freedom and profound communion. Being and becoming converge into an experience beyond words -- and we recognize that we already live in the realm of the sacred.

Our awakening to a new understanding of the universe in both its horizontal and its vertical aspects represents a stunning re-imagining of where we are as a species. Realizing that we live at the intersection of both the horizontal unfolding of the universe and the vertical arising of the universe presents a view of existence that reaches beyond any particular nation, region, or ethnic group. We are bio-cosmic beings who are waking up to the fact that we live in an ever-emergent universe and our evolutionary task is to grow into the bigness of who we are, both personally and collectively. This vision of the human journey is big enough to honor the diversity of our past and to act as a beacon for our collective future.

Although the idea of an ever-emergent universe has ancient roots in human experience, it is also radically new as the frontiers of modern science offer a growing recognition of how dynamic the universe truly is. The universe is not static, sitting quietly in empty space; instead, the totality of the universe is everywhere in motion and being regenerated moment by moment -- a process requiring the flow-through of a stupendous amount of energy. In the words of cosmologist Brian Swimme, "The universe emerges out of an all-nourishing abyss not only fourteen billion years ago but in every moment." Moment by moment, the universe emerges as a single orchestration -- a uni-verse or single verse of manifestation. Because nothing is left out of the regeneration of the universe, we are participants in a cosmic scale process whether we are conscious of it or not.

This insight is not restricted to science. Based upon decades of research described in my book "The Living Universe," harvesting the wisdom of human experience is like watching a picture gradually come into focus and seeing an extraordinary image of the universe emerging before our eyes. Within each major tradition -- Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Indigenous, and more -- we can find remarkably similar descriptions of the universe and the life force that sustains it: Christians affirm that God is not separate from this world but continuously creates it anew, so that we live, move, and have our being in God. Muslims declare that the entire universe is continually coming into being, and that each moment is a new "occasion" for Allah to create the universe. Hindus proclaim that the entire universe is a single body that is being continually danced into creation by a divine Life force or Brahman. Buddhists state that the entire universe arises freshly at every moment in an unceasing flow of interdependent, co-arising where everything depends upon everything else. Taoists state that the Tao is the "Mother of the Universe," the inexhaustible source from which all things rise and fall without ceasing. Confucians view our universe as a unified and interpenetrating whole that is sustained and nourished by the vitality of the life force or ch'i. Indigenous peoples declare that an animating wind or life force blows through all things in the world and there is aliveness and sacred power everywhere. And many Western thinkers portray the universe as a single, living creature continually regenerating itself as it evolves toward higher levels of complexity and consciousness. Beneath the differences in language, a common reality is being described -- our life is part of a larger life that is being continuously renewed. The universe inhabits us as much as we inhabit the universe.

The unity of existence is not an experience to be created; rather, it is an always-manifesting condition waiting to be appreciated and welcomed into awareness. The "power of now" derives
from the entire universe arising at every moment as an extremely precise flow. When we are in the now, we are "reality surfing" -- riding the wave of continuous creation. Each moment is a fresh formation of the universe, emerging seamlessly and flawlessly. It is the doubly powerful nature of life at the intersection of emergence and evolution that gives such intensity and span of meaning to existence, and awakens naturally a spiritual appreciation for all of life.

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/duane-elgin/continuous-creation_b_868086.html

May 31, 2011

Countdown begins to World Environment Day 2011

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - Whether through a litter clean-up around Mount Everest, a training programme in forest management Costa Rica or a music festival in Belgium, millions of people across the world will join forces to mark World Environment Day (WED) on 5 June 2011.

This year's WED theme is 'Forests: Nature at Your Service', which highlights the crucial environmental, economic and social roles played by the world's forests.

As WED host nation for 2011, India will be the focus of worldwide celebrations, with major events planned in New Delhi and Bangalore. The World 10K Race on 5 June will see some 25,000 runners pound the pavements of Bangalore in support of WED. Organizers and participants will also inaugurate a 'World 10K Forest', to which more trees will be added at future races.

UNEP will also release the Forests in a Green Economy report in New Delhi on 5 June. In the face of continuing deforestation (currently estimated at 5.2 million hectares worldwide per year), the report outlines how increased public and private investment in forest management and forest resources can boost employment, drastically reduce deforestation and help tackle climate change.

Beyond India, WED celebrations are already taking shape in cities, towns, villages and communities across the world, including:

- NEPAL: UNEP is supporting a clean-up expedition to remove an estimated 9 tons of litter in and around Mount Everest. Enlisting some 60 climber volunteers, the long-term aim of the initiative is to develop more sustainable waste management facilities and recycling plants in the region
- CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE: A major international summit on tropical forest basins will be held from 31 May to 6 June. The event will focus on the sustainable management of forest ecosystems in the Amazon, Congo and Mekong Borneo basins
- BRAZIL: The 'MudaRock Project' - a free music download service - will be launched on 3 June. For every song or video downloaded by users, a tree sapling will be planted in a
reforestation area in Brazil. The project aims to plant one million native trees within a year.

- COSTA RICA: A major success story in reforestation (having increased its forest cover from 22 percent in 1995 to 51 percent by 2010), Costa Rica will host participants from 15 neighbouring countries for a training course on sustainable forest management.
- CANADA: Toronto is the regional host city for World Environment Day celebrations in North America. To date, over 50 WED events have been registered in Canada including environmental workshops for students, a high-level consultation on the Green Economy with 40 environmental leaders and a series of book readings for children.
- BELGIUM: WED celebrations will kick off on 5 June with an environment fete at Parc Cinquantenaire in Brussels, featuring activities, stands and a music concert. Brussels will also be welcoming UN Youth Ambassador and Disney star Monique Coleman as well as comic book hero Marsupilami and his illustrator Batem.
- BAHRAIN: UNEP's Regional Office for West Asia will help co-ordinate a beach-cleaning and tree-planting campaign.

In the run-up to World Environment Day, UNEP Goodwill Ambassadors Gisele Bündchen and Don Cheadle are going head-to-head in the WED Challenge.

Before WED officially kicks off, individuals, groups, families and schools - even entire communities - can post details of their planned green events online at http://www.wedchallenge.org

When registering a WED activity on the website, you'll be asked to pledge your activity to either Don or Gisele. Full of goodwill, Gisele has pledged to plant a tree for every activity registered in her name. Full of confidence, Don Cheadle has pledged to plant two.

When the votes are counted on 5 June, the result will be a new forest inaugurated by the winner, leaving a lasting green legacy from the global WED community.

Bollywood stars Priyanka Chopra and Rahul Bose are also facing off for World Environment Day in the WED Challenge India. More details are available at http://www.wedchallenge.org/india

Whether it's switching from plastic bags to cloth bags, car-pooling with colleagues or organizing a tree-planting day, WED activities can be big, small, local, international, noisy, quiet...just as long as they're green.

Visit www.unep.org/wed to browse the A-Z of WED ideas, find your inspiration and tell the world what you're doing.

For a comprehensive list of WED events in India and around the world, please visit: www.unep.org/wed

For more information on events for World Environment Day, please use the following regional contacts:
A Warming Planet Struggles to Feed Itself

By Justin Gills
New York Times

CIUDAD OBREGÓN, Mexico — The dun wheat field spreading out at Ravi P. Singh’s feet offered a possible clue to human destiny. Baked by a desert sun and deliberately starved of water, the plants were parched and nearly dead.

Dr. Singh, a wheat breeder, grabbed seed heads that should have been plump with the staff of life. His practiced fingers found empty husks.

“You’re not going to feed the people with that,” he said.

But then, over in Plot 88, his eyes settled on a healthier plant, one that had managed to thrive in spite of the drought, producing plump kernels of wheat. “This is beautiful!” he shouted as wheat beards rustled in the wind.
Hope in a stalk of grain: It is a hope the world needs these days, for the great agricultural system that feeds the human race is in trouble.

The rapid growth in farm output that defined the late 20th century has slowed to the point that it is failing to keep up with the demand for food, driven by population increases and rising affluence in once-poor countries.

Consumption of the four staples that supply most human calories — wheat, rice, corn and soybeans — has outstripped production for much of the past decade, drawing once-large stockpiles down to worrisome levels. The imbalance between supply and demand has resulted in two huge spikes in international grain prices since 2007, with some grains more than doubling in cost.

Those price jumps, though felt only moderately in the West, have worsened hunger for tens of millions of poor people, destabilizing politics in scores of countries, from Mexico to Uzbekistan to Yemen. The Haitian government was ousted in 2008 amid food riots, and anger over high prices has played a role in the recent Arab uprisings.

Now, the latest scientific research suggests that a previously discounted factor is helping to destabilize the food system: climate change.

Many of the failed harvests of the past decade were a consequence of weather disasters, like floods in the United States, drought in Australia and blistering heat waves in Europe and Russia. Scientists believe some, though not all, of those events were caused or worsened by human-induced global warming.

Temperatures are rising rapidly during the growing season in some of the most important agricultural countries, and a paper published several weeks ago found that this had shaved several percentage points off potential yields, adding to the price gyrations.

For nearly two decades, scientists had predicted that climate change would be relatively manageable for agriculture, suggesting that even under worst-case assumptions, it would probably take until 2080 for food prices to double.

In part, they were counting on a counterintuitive ace in the hole: that rising carbon dioxide levels, the primary contributor to global warming, would act as a powerful plant fertilizer and offset many of the ill effects of climate change.

Until a few years ago, these assumptions went largely unchallenged. But lately, the destabilization of the food system and the soaring prices have rattled many leading scientists.

“The success of agriculture has been astounding,” said Cynthia Rosenzweig, a researcher at NASA who helped pioneer the study of climate change and agriculture. “But I think there’s starting to be premonitions that it may not continue forever.”

A scramble is on to figure out whether climate science has been too sanguine about the risks. Some researchers, analyzing computer forecasts that are used to advise governments on future crop prospects, are pointing out what they consider to be gaping holes. These include a failure to
consider the effects of extreme weather, like the floods and the heat waves that are increasing as the earth warms.

A rising unease about the future of the world’s food supply came through during interviews this year with more than 50 agricultural experts working in nine countries.

These experts say that in coming decades, farmers need to withstand whatever climate shocks come their way while roughly doubling the amount of food they produce to meet rising demand. And they need to do it while reducing the considerable environmental damage caused by the business of agriculture.

Agronomists emphasize that the situation is far from hopeless. Examples are already available, from the deserts of Mexico to the rice paddies of India, to show that it may be possible to make agriculture more productive and more resilient in the face of climate change. Farmers have achieved huge gains in output in the past, and rising prices are a powerful incentive to do so again.

But new crop varieties and new techniques are required, far beyond those available now, scientists said. Despite the urgent need, they added, promised financing has been slow to materialize, much of the necessary work has yet to begin and, once it does, it is likely to take decades to bear results.

“There’s just such a tremendous disconnect, with people not understanding the highly dangerous situation we are in,” said Marianne Bänziger, deputy chief of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, a leading research institute in Mexico.

A wheat physiologist at the center, Matthew Reynolds, fretted over the potential consequences of not attacking the problem vigorously.

“What a horrible world it will be if food really becomes short from one year to the next,” he said. “What will that do to society?”

‘The World Is Talking’

Sitting with a group of his fellow wheat farmers, Francisco Javier Ramos Bours voiced a suspicion. Water shortages had already arrived in recent years for growers in his region, the Yaqui Valley, which sits in the Sonoran Desert of northwestern Mexico. In his view, global climate change could well be responsible.

“All the world is talking about it,” Mr. Ramos said as the other farmers nodded.

Farmers everywhere face rising difficulties: water shortages as well as flash floods. Their crops are afflicted by emerging pests and diseases and by blasts of heat beyond anything they remember.

In a recent interview on the far side of the world, in northeastern India, a rice farmer named Ram Khatri Yadav offered his own complaint about the changing climate. “It will not rain in the rainy season, but it will rain in the nonrainy season,” he said. “The cold season is also shrinking.”
Decades ago, the wheat farmers in the Yaqui Valley of Mexico were the vanguard of a broad development in agriculture called the Green Revolution, which used improved crop varieties and more intensive farming methods to raise food production across much of the developing world.

When Norman E. Borlaug, a young American agronomist, began working here in the 1940s under the sponsorship of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Yaqui Valley farmers embraced him. His successes as a breeder helped farmers raise Mexico’s wheat output sixfold.

In the 1960s, Dr. Borlaug spread his approach to India and Pakistan, where mass starvation was feared. Output soared there, too.

Other countries joined the Green Revolution, and food production outstripped population growth through the latter half of the 20th century. Dr. Borlaug became the only agronomist ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1970, for helping to “provide bread for a hungry world.”

As he accepted the prize in Oslo, he issued a stern warning. “We may be at high tide now,” he said, “but ebb tide could soon set in if we become complacent and relax our efforts.”

As output rose, staple grains — which feed people directly or are used to produce meat, eggs, dairy products and farmed fish — became cheaper and cheaper. Poverty still prevented many people in poor countries from buying enough food, but over all, the percentage of hungry people in the world shrank.

By the late 1980s, food production seemed under control. Governments and foundations began to cut back on agricultural research, or to redirect money into the problems created by intensive farming, like environmental damage. Over a 20-year period, Western aid for agricultural development in poor countries fell by almost half, with some of the world’s most important research centers suffering mass layoffs.

Just as Dr. Borlaug had predicted, the consequences of this loss of focus began to show up in the world’s food system toward the end of the century. Output continued to rise, but because fewer innovations were reaching farmers, the growth rate slowed.

That lull occurred just as food and feed demand was starting to take off, thanks in part to rising affluence across much of Asia. Millions of people added meat and dairy products to their diets, requiring considerable grain to produce. Other factors contributed to demand, including a policy of converting much of the American corn crop into ethanol.

And erratic weather began eating into yields. A 2003 heat wave in Europe that some researchers believe was worsened by human-induced global warming slashed agricultural output in some countries by as much as 30 percent. A long drought in Australia, also possibly linked to climate change, cut wheat and rice production.

In 2007 and 2008, with grain stockpiles low, prices doubled and in some cases tripled. Whole countries began hoarding food, and panic buying ensued in some markets, notably for rice. Food riots broke out in more than 30 countries.
Farmers responded to the high prices by planting as much as possible, and healthy harvests in 2008 and 2009 helped rebuild stocks, to a degree. That factor, plus the global recession, drove prices down in 2009. But by last year, more weather-related harvest failures sent them soaring again. This year, rice supplies are adequate, but with bad weather threatening the wheat and corn crops in some areas, markets remain jittery.

Experts are starting to fear that the era of cheap food may be over. “Our mindset was surpluses,” said Dan Glickman, a former United States secretary of agriculture. “That has just changed overnight.”

Forty years ago, a third of the population in the developing world was undernourished. By the tail end of the Green Revolution, in the mid-1990s, the share had fallen below 20 percent, and the absolute number of hungry people dipped below 800 million for the first time in modern history.

But the recent price spikes have helped cause the largest increases in world hunger in decades. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated the number of hungry people at 925 million last year, and the number is expected to be higher when a fresh estimate is completed this year. The World Bank says the figure could be as high as 940 million.

Dr. Borlaug’s latest successor at the corn and wheat institute, Hans-Joachim Braun, recently outlined the challenges facing the world’s farmers. On top of the weather disasters, he said, booming cities are chewing up agricultural land and competing with farmers for water. In some of the world’s breadbaskets, farmers have achieved high output only by pumping groundwater much faster than nature can replenish it.

“This is in no way sustainable,” Dr. Braun said.

The farmers of the Yaqui Valley grow their wheat in a near-desert, relying on irrigation. Their water comes by aqueduct from nearby mountains, but for parts of the past decade, rainfall was below normal. Scientists do not know if this has been a consequence of climate change, but Northern Mexico falls squarely within a global belt that is expected to dry further because of human emissions of greenhouse gases.

Dr. Braun is leading efforts to tackle problems of this sort with new wheat varieties that would be able to withstand many kinds of stress, including scant water. Descendants of the plant that one of his breeders, Dr. Singh, found in a wheat field one recent day might eventually wind up in farmers’ fields the world over.

But budgets for this kind of research remain exceedingly tight, frustrating agronomists who feel that the problems are growing more urgent by the year.

“There are biological limitations on how fast we can do this work,” Dr. Braun said. “If we don’t get started now, we are going to be in serious trouble.”

Shaken Assumptions
For decades, scientists believed that the human dependence on fossil fuels, for all the problems it was expected to cause, would offer one enormous benefit.

Carbon dioxide, the main gas released by combustion, is also the primary fuel for the growth of plants. They draw it out of the air and, using the energy from sunlight, convert the carbon into energy-dense compounds like glucose. All human and animal life runs on these compounds.

Humans have already raised the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by 40 percent since the Industrial Revolution, and are on course to double or triple it over the coming century. Studies have long suggested that the extra gas would supercharge the world’s food crops, and might be especially helpful in years when the weather is difficult.

But many of those studies were done in artificial conditions, like greenhouses or special growth chambers. For the past decade, scientists at the University of Illinois have been putting the “CO2 fertilization effect” to a real-world test in the two most important crops grown in the United States.

They started by planting soybeans in a field, then sprayed extra carbon dioxide from a giant tank. Based on the earlier research, they hoped the gas might bump yields as much as 30 percent under optimal growing conditions.

But when they harvested their soybeans, they got a rude surprise: the bump was only half as large. “When we measured the yields, it was like, wait a minute — this is not what we expected,” said Elizabeth A. Ainsworth, a Department of Agriculture researcher who played a leading role in the work.

When they grew the soybeans in the sort of conditions expected to prevail in a future climate, with high temperatures or low water, the extra carbon dioxide could not fully offset the yield decline caused by those factors.

They also ran tests using corn, America’s single most valuable crop and the basis for its meat production and its biofuel industry. While that crop was already known to be less responsive to carbon dioxide, a yield bump was still expected — especially during droughts. The Illinois researchers got no bump.

Their work has contributed to a broader body of research suggesting that extra carbon dioxide does act as plant fertilizer, but that the benefits are less than previously believed — and probably less than needed to avert food shortages. “One of the things that we’re starting to believe is that the positives of CO2 are unlikely to outweigh the negatives of the other factors,” said Andrew D. B. Leakey, another of the Illinois researchers.

Other recent evidence suggests that longstanding assumptions about food production on a warming planet may have been too optimistic.

Two economists, Wolfram Schlenker of Columbia University and Michael J. Roberts of North Carolina State University, have pioneered ways to compare crop yields and natural temperature variability at a fine scale. Their work shows that when crops are subjected to temperatures above
a certain threshold — about 84 degrees for corn and 86 degrees for soybeans — yields fall sharply.

This line of research suggests that in the type of climate predicted for the United States by the end of the century, with more scorching days in the growing season, yields of today’s crop varieties could fall by 30 percent or more.

Though it has not yet happened in the United States, many important agricultural countries are already warming rapidly in the growing season, with average increases of several degrees. A few weeks ago, David B. Lobell of Stanford University published a paper with Dr. Schlenker suggesting that temperature increases in France, Russia, China and other countries were suppressing crop yields, adding to the pressures on the food system.

“ать think there’s been an under-recognition of just how sensitive crops are to heat, and how fast heat exposure is increasing,” Dr. Lobell said.

Such research has provoked controversy. The findings go somewhat beyond those of a 2007 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations body that episodically reviews climate science and advises governments.

That report found that while climate change was likely to pose severe challenges for agriculture in the tropics, it would probably be beneficial in some of the chillier regions of the Northern Hemisphere, and that the carbon dioxide effect should offset many problems.

In an interview at the University of Illinois, one of the leading scientists behind the work there, Stephen P. Long, sharply criticized the 2007 report, saying it had failed to sound a sufficient alarm. “I felt it needed to be much more honest in saying this is our best guess at the moment, but there are probably huge errors in there,” Dr. Long said. “We’re talking about the future food supply of the world.”

William E. Easterling, dean of earth sciences at Pennsylvania State University and a primary author of the 2007 report, said in an interview that the recent research had slightly altered his perspective. “We have probably to some extent overestimated” the benefits of carbon dioxide in computerized crop forecasts, he said. But he added that applying a “correction factor” would probably take care of the problem, and he doubted that the estimates in the report would change drastically as a result.

The 2007 report did point out a hole in the existing body of research: most forecasts had failed to consider several factors that could conceivably produce nasty surprises, like a projected rise in extreme weather events. No sooner had the report been published than food prices began rising, partly because of crop failures caused by just such extremes.

Oxfam, the international relief group, projected recently that food prices would more than double by 2030 from today’s high levels, with climate change responsible for perhaps half the increase. As worries like that proliferate, some scientists are ready to go back to the drawing board regarding agriculture and climate change.
Dr. Rosenzweig, the NASA climate scientist, played a leading role in forming the old consensus. But in an interview at her office in Manhattan, she ticked off recent stresses on the food system and said they had led her to take a fresh look.

She is pulling together a global consortium of researchers whose goal will be to produce more detailed and realistic computer forecasts; she won high-level endorsement for the project at a recent meeting between British and United States officials. “We absolutely have to get the science lined up to provide these answers,” Dr. Rosenzweig said.

**Promises Unkept**

At the end of a dirt road in northeastern India, nestled between two streams, lies the remote village of Samhauta. Anand Kumar Singh, a farmer there, recently related a story that he could scarcely believe himself.

Last June, he planted 10 acres of a new variety of rice. On Aug. 23, the area was struck by a severe flood that submerged his field for 10 days. In years past, such a flood would have destroyed his crop. But the new variety sprang back to life, yielding a robust harvest.

“That was a miracle,” Mr. Singh said.

The miracle was the product not of divine intervention but of technology — an illustration of how far scientists may be able to go in helping farmers adapt to the problems that bedevil them.

“It’s the best example in agriculture,” said Julia Bailey-Serres, a researcher at the University of California, Riverside, who has done genetic work on the rice variety that Mr. Singh used. “The submergence-tolerant rice essentially sits and waits out the flood.”

In the heyday of the Green Revolution, the 1960s, leaders like Dr. Borlaug founded an international network of research centers to focus on the world’s major crops. The corn and wheat center in Mexico is one. The new rice variety that is exciting farmers in India is the product of another, the [International Rice Research Institute](https://www.irri.org) in the Philippines.

Leading researchers say it is possible to create crop varieties that are more resistant to drought and flooding and that respond especially well to rising carbon dioxide. The scientists are less certain that crops can be made to withstand withering heat, though genetic engineering may eventually do the trick.

The flood-tolerant rice was created from an old strain grown in a small area of India, but decades of work were required to improve it. Money was so tight that even after the rice had been proven to survive floods for twice as long as previous varieties, distribution to farmers was not assured. Then an American charity, the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](https://www.gatesfoundation.org), stepped in with a $20 million grant to finance final development and distribution of the rice in India and other countries. It may get into a million farmers’ hands this year.

The Gateses, widely known for their work in public health, have also become leading backers of agricultural projects in recent years. “I’m an optimist,” Mr. Gates said in an interview. “I think we can get crops that will mitigate many of our problems.”
The Gates Foundation has awarded $1.7 billion for agricultural projects since 2006, but even a charity as large as it is cannot solve humanity’s food problems on its own. Governments have recognized that far more effort is needed on their part, but they have been slow to deliver.

In 2008 and 2009, in the midst of the political crises set off by food prices, the world’s governments outbid one another to offer support. At a conference in L’Aquila, Italy, they pledged about $22 billion for agricultural development.

It later turned out, however, that no more than half of that was new money not previously committed to agriculture, and two years later, the extra financing has not fully materialized. “It’s a disappointment,” Mr. Gates said.

The Obama administration has won high marks from antihunger advocates for focusing on the issue. President Obama pledged $3.5 billion at L’Aquila, more than any other country, and the United States has begun an ambitious initiative called Feed the Future to support agricultural development in 20 of the neediest countries.

So far, the administration has won $1.9 billion from Congress. Amid the budget struggles in Washington, it remains to be seen whether the United States will fully honor its pledge.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign nowadays is that poor countries themselves are starting to invest in agriculture in a serious way, as many did not do in the years when food was cheap.

In Africa, largely bypassed by the Green Revolution but with enormous potential, a dozen countries are on the verge of fulfilling a promise to devote 10 percent of their budgets to farm development, up from 5 percent or less.

“In my country, every penny counts,” Agnes Kalibata, the agriculture minister of Rwanda, said in an interview. With difficulty, Rwanda has met the 10 percent pledge, and she cited a terracing project in the country’s highlands that has raised potato yields by 600 percent for some farmers.

Yet the leading agricultural experts say that poor countries cannot solve the problems by themselves. The United Nations recently projected that global population would hit 10 billion by the end of the century, 3 billion more than today. Coupled with the demand for diets richer in protein, the projections mean that food production may need to double by later in the century.

Unlike in the past, that demand must somehow be met on a planet where little new land is available for farming, where water supplies are tightening, where the temperature is rising, where the weather has become erratic and where the food system is already showing serious signs of instability.

“We’ve doubled the world’s food production several times before in history, and now we have to do it one more time,” said Jonathan A. Foley, a researcher at the University of Minnesota. “The last doubling is the hardest. It is possible, but it’s not going to be easy.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/science/earth/05harvest.html?_r=1
The phrase "axial age" has been used to describe the relatively brief period of time -- roughly 700 years -- when the great religions of the world arose: Hinduism and Buddhism in India; Confucianism and Taoism in China; and monotheism in the Middle East. The period from roughly 900 BC to 200 BC is referred to as an "axial age" because it set the orientation or direction for spirituality for more than two thousand years into the future.

Around the world, the axial age was marked by the growth of trading networks, the rise of large cities, and massive armies equipped with iron-age weapons. This was also a time of extreme violence and widespread warfare. All of the world's great religions understood that a core challenge was to moderate the violence that emerged from our perceived sense of separation from one another. Despite their great diversity of culture and geography, a common understanding of the need to put compassion at the forefront can be found in all of the world's wisdom traditions. Here are a few examples:

As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.
-- Christianity

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.
-- Judaism

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.
-- Islam

Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.
-- Hinduism

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
-- Buddhism

Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you.
-- Confucianism

Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.
-- Taoism

All things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves.
-- Native American
As these quotes reveal, the first axial age began with a view of separation and the "other." In a world of growing individualism and differentiation, the religious emphasis on compassion served as a vital bridge between people. Now, a second major axis with a very different orientation is opening in the world. Religions of separation are becoming religions of communion as we realize there is no place to go where we are separate from the ever-generative womb of the living universe. The second axial age begins with a recognition emerging from the combined wisdom of both science and spirituality; namely, that we are already home -- that the living universe already exists within us as much as we live within it. In the words theologian, Thomas Berry, "The universe is a communion and a community. We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself." Compassion remains a vital element of spirituality, but it is now being held increasingly within a context of communion rather than separation.

As people around the world move into spiritual communion and empathic connection with the living universe, we see the role of religion differently: Less often do people look for a bridge to the divine. Increasingly, people seek guidance and community in the journey of awakening within the living universe. People want to know there are others on the journey of soul-making and seek guideposts along the way to support the awakening of their experience of unity and intimacy within the universe. Less and less are people seeking only religions of belief. Carried along in this great cultural project of awakening, we are increasingly seeking religions of direct experience -- religions of communion with a living universe.

When our aliveness consciously connects with the aliveness of the universe, a current of aliveness flows through us. At that moment -- when life meets life -- a direct connection between the living universe and ourselves is realized and we have an awakening experience. We no longer see ourselves in the universe, we experience that we are the universe. We do not need to manufacture or imagine awakening experiences. Instead, we only need to experience directly what is already true about the fundamental nature of ourselves as beings who live within a living universe. When the conscious knowing of ourselves becomes transparent to the reality of our participation in an ever-emerging universe, we recognize there was no separation to begin with -- we all emerge in communion at every moment within the unity of a continuously regenerating universe.

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/duane-elgin/coming-together_b_870538.html

June 5, 2011

UNEP Report Spotlights Enormous Economic and Human Benefits from Boosting Funding for Forests

Investing Just 0.034 Percent More of Global GDP Could Halve Deforestation, Generate Millions of Jobs and Combat Climate Change

United Nations Environment Programme
Delhi/Nairobi/World - Investing an additional US$40 billion a year in the forestry sector could halve deforestation rates by 2030, increase rates of tree planting by around 140 per cent by 2050, and catalyze the creation of millions of new jobs according to a report by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

Backed by the right kinds of enabling policies, such an investment - equivalent to about two-thirds more than what is spent on the sector today - could also sequester or remove an extra 28 per cent of carbon from the atmosphere, thus playing a key role in combating climate change.

*Forests in a Green Economy: A Synthesis* was unveiled during this year's World Environment Day (WED) celebrations. The theme, *Forests: Nature at Your Service*, underscores the multitude of benefits that forests provide to humanity.

WED 2011 also comes during the UN-declared International Year of the Forests, which is in part focused on the critical links between forests and the transition to a low carbon, resource efficient green economy.

"WED 2011 comes precisely 12 months before the Rio+20 meeting in Brazil next year where the world will come together to try and forge a new and more decisive response to the sustainable development challenge of the 21st century," said Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director.

"The Green Economy initiative has identified forestry as one of the ten central sectors capable of propelling a transition to a low carbon, resource efficient, employment-generating future if backed by investment and forward-looking policies," he added.

"There are already many encouraging signals; the annual net forest loss since 1990 has fallen from around eight million to around five million hectares and in some regions such as Asia, the Caribbean and Europe forest area has actually increased over those 20 years," said Mr. Steiner.

The report also spotlights how the area of planted forests including those as part of agroforestry schemes on farms and plantations have grown from 3.6 million hectares in 1990 to just under five million hectares in 2010.

Groups like WWF are cataloguing information and experience in respect to plantations to maximize biodiversity and ecosystem services.

It shows in areas such as Brazil's Atlantic rainforest how more creative tree planting can assist in providing buffer zones around intact forests allowing regeneration and recovery.

"There is also an increasing engagement from the private sector in these nature-based assets and mobilization by cities and communities across the globe in tree planting efforts. Meanwhile, new kinds of smart market mechanisms, ranging from REDD+ to payments for ecosystem services, are emerging," he added.
"WED is a day for everyone to act in support of forests and to nurture these green shoots of a Green Economy as the world looks towards how best to accelerate, scale-up and above all implement these transitions in Rio in 2012," he said.

The Forests in a Green Economy synthesis also builds on the work of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), a broad partnership hosted by UNEP.

It underlines that natural capital such as forests can represent up to 90 per cent of the GDP of the rural poor. India is among a dozen countries taking the global findings of TEEB into national assessments that in turn could translate the value of nature and its services into national accounts.

Today's synthesis report spotlights other ways in which governments are using forward-looking policies nationally that can also catalyze market-based instruments, such as credit, microfinance, leases and certification schemes.

• For example, the host of this year's World Environment Day festivities, India, has recently approved a national initiative to increase forest cover over five million hectares, improve quality of forest cover over another five million hectares and improve crucial ecosystem services provided by forests, such as hydrological services. The new Green India Plan aims to increase forest-based incomes for three million households.

• Over 80 per cent of the US$8 billion National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which underwrites at least 100 days of paid work for rural households in India, is invested in water conservation, irrigation and land development. This has generated three billion working days-worth of employment benefiting close to 60 million households.

"We must accelerate investments for protecting the planet's forest resources as recommended in the 'Forests in a Green Economy' report. We must leverage forward-looking policies that conserve and improve the quality of our forests, while generating employment and socio-economic returns for local communities - much like the Green India Mission that we have launched. An integrated approach such as this will prioritize conservation and sustainable management of forests, and truly enable forests to play a critical role in greening the economy," said India's Minister of Environment Jairam Ramesh.

"I must add that the road to a Green Economy needs a new economic paradigm that can bring out the true value of our natural capital. Here in India, we have initiated a major exercise on the valuation of our natural capital, and will incorporate this into our mainstream national accounts by 2015," he said.

Globally, to undertake a green transition, an additional average investment of US$ 40 billion per year or around 0.034 per cent of global GDP in the forest sector is required, starting with US$15 billion in 2011 and increasing up to approximately US$57 billion by 2050.

Carefully planned investments would also contribute to increased employment from 25 million today to 30 million by 2050.
To mobilize public and private investments in forests, the UNEP report emphasizes the role of the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+).

PES is a scheme of voluntary transactions aimed to compensate land owners for providing ecosystem services to society, such as carbon storage, watershed protection or biodiversity conservation.

REDD+ recognizes the importance of forests for carbon sequestration through conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. To support these activities, this mechanism allows financial transfers between industrialized and developing countries and between national level agencies and communities and landowners.

Both mechanisms provide new avenues for leveraging political attention, and much-needed private, public and bilateral finance. For example:

- In Ecuador, the local government in the town of Pimampiro pays US$6 to US$12 per hectare per year to a small group of farmers to conserve forest and natural grassland in the area surrounding the town's water source.
- Norway's contribution to the Amazon Fund in Brazil is achieving a new form of partnership for realizing deforestation reduction targets. In 2010, Norway announced a grant of US$ 1 billion to Indonesia in return for agreed measures to tackle deforestation and degradation. Under the terms of the agreement, Indonesia has announced a two-year moratorium on new permits to clear natural forests and peatlands.

The value of the services forests provide is not confined to developing economies. One scientific assessment by the Pembina Institute has estimated the value of the services in Canada's boreal forests—including flood control, pest control by birds and carbon sequestration— at just over US$90 billion a year.

**Moving forward**

The report suggests that knowledge, vision, enabling conditions and new investments are all necessary to realize the full contributions of forests in a green economy, which is based on a new economic paradigm.

"A major issue is that green economies and associated policies will no doubt apply differently across countries, depending on national circumstances, priorities and capacities. Encouraging a transition to green economies will require a broad range of financial, regulatory, institutional, and technological measures. This is a specific area in which the capacity of developing countries has to be strengthened." says Jan McAlpine, Director of the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat.

The Green Economy "in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication" is also one of two key issues that will be addressed at the Rio+20 Summit next year in Brazil.
The public and the private sector both have an important role to play in accelerating the transition to a Green Economy. On the one hand, governments must promote policy and technical support to ensure forest-based investments.

On the other hand, business and financial institutions need to invest in forest projects, and provide independent and verifiable risk assessments and risk insurance services, amongst others.

Eduardo Rojas-Briales, Chair of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) said, "Supportive social, legal and institutional settings are key to the sustainable management of natural resources. Optimal land use, further life cycle analysis, ecosystem landscape management, and governance are all key themes that will help unlock the full potential of forests in creating green economies."

Additional investment is also required for up-front capacity building and preparatory work, continued implementation of mechanisms that compensate for opportunity costs, reforestation, and payments for forest protection.

Some examples of successful policy interventions noted in the report highlight the benefits and positive results of sustainable management of forests.

- Forest related interventions in Costa Rica have led to economic growth and a dramatic increase in forest cover. In 1995, forest cover in the country was 22 per cent, but by 2010, it had recovered to 51 per cent of the country's land area.
- Community Forest Management is the second largest forest management system in Nepal, where forests cover more than 40 per cent of the land. It has contributed to restoring forest resources in the country, and turned an annual rate of decline in forest cover of 1.9 per cent during the 1990s into an annual increase of 1.35 per cent between the period of 2000 and 2005.
- The restoration of natural mangrove forests in Vietnam for US$1.1 million resulted in annual saving of US$7.3 million in sea dyke maintenance.

These examples, amongst others, illustrate the significant socio-economic returns that forests can provide. With additional investments and policy reforms, the forest sector can provide a foundation for building a low-carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive green economy.

Notes to Editors:

The report, Forests in a Green Economy, A Synthesis, and other WED materials, can be found on the UNEP website at: www.unep.org and at www.unep.org/greeneconomy

For photos/videos please check www.unep.org or www.newsmarket.com

The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF)

The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) is a voluntary arrangement comprising 14 international organizations and secretariats with substantial programmes on forests (CIFOR, FAO, ITTO, IUFRO, CBD, GEF, UNCCD, UNFF, UNFCCC, UNDP, UNEP, ICRAF, WB,
IUCN). The CPF's mission is to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forest and to strengthen long term political commitment to this end. CPF members share their experiences and build on them to produce new benefits for their respective constituencies. Joint initiatives and other collaboration activities are supported by voluntary contributions from participating members. For more information: www.fao.org/forestry/cpf/en/

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June 6, 2011

Church express concern over excessive mining in Goa

By Babu Thomas
Christian Today India

The Catholic Church in Goa expressed concern over excessive mining in the state which it said posed a grave threat to ecologically sensitive areas.

Marking World Environment Day on Sunday, the Council for Social Justice and Peace (CSJP), the social wing of the archdiocese, lamented that mining, deforestation and aggressive promotion of eco-tourism by the state government was eating into Goa's green cover.

The Council's executive director Fr Maverick Fernandes in a statement said forests in Goa were under severe attack due to mining for iron and manganese ore.

The mining he said was of great threat as Goa lies in the centre of the Western Ghats and is endowed with the best forests in the country.

The Church has also expressed concern at the state's forest policy which it pointed required "serious overhaul". The Church stressed on the creation of forest buffer zones and banning diversion of forest land for mining purposes.

"The problems of mining, deforestation, pollution, loss of water resources and wildlife trade constitute the crucial issues to be dealt with while discussing the need of sustainable use of forests," said the statement.
"Eco-tourism is completely against the interests of the forests of Goa in the present scenario,” said Fernandes. He further noted that monitoring and regulating transportation of forest produce through the forest gates were overlooked.

On Sunday, various events were held across the country to mark the World Environment Day for which the theme was "Forests: Nature at Your Service". This year the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep) selected India as the global host.

To spread awareness on environmental conservation, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) urged churches to observe 'Green Sunday' on June 5 with special prayers, sermons and intercessions.


June 7, 2011

Simplicity Is Not Sacrifice!

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

There is a common misconception that living more simply requires a life of sacrifice. In fact, it is just the opposite: When we live more lightly on the material side of life, we create the conditions for greater satisfaction and meaning on the non-material side of life. Lifestyles emphasizing consumerism are the ones that require sacrifice:

• Sacrifice is a lifestyle that is overstressed, overbusy, and overworked.
• Sacrifice is investing long hours doing work that is neither meaningful nor satisfying.
• Sacrifice is being apart from family and community to earn a living.
• Sacrifice is the stress of commuting long distances and coping with traffic.
• Sacrifice is the white noise of civilization blotting out the subtle sounds of nature.
• Sacrifice is hiding nature's beauty behind a jumble of billboard advertisements.
• Sacrifice is the smell of the city stronger than the scent of the Earth.
• Sacrifice is carrying more than 200 toxic chemicals in our bodies.
• Sacrifice is the massive extinction of plants and animals and an impoverished biosphere.
• Sacrifice is being cut off from nature's wildness and wisdom.
• Sacrifice is global climate disruption, crop failure, famine, and forced migration.
• Sacrifice is the absence of feelings of neighborliness and community.
• Sacrifice is the lack of opportunity for soulful encounters with others.
• Sacrifice is feeling divided among the different parts of our lives.

Voluntary simplicity is not sacrifice:

• Simplicity fosters a more harmonious relationship with the Earth.
• Simplicity promotes fairness and equity among the people of the Earth.
• Simplicity cuts through needless busyness, clutter, and complications.
• Simplicity enhances living with balance--inner and outer, work and family, and more.
• Simplicity reveals the beauty and intelligence of nature's designs.
• Simplicity increases the resources available for future generations.
• Simplicity helps save animal and plant species from extinction.
• Simplicity responds to global shortages of oil, water, and other vital resources.
• Simplicity emphasizes our relationships with family, community, nature, and the universe.
• Simplicity yields lasting satisfactions that exceed the fleeting pleasures of consumerism.
• Simplicity fosters the sanity of self-discovery and an integrated approach to life.
• Simplicity blossoms in community and connects us to the world with a feeling of belonging.
• Simplicity is a lighter lifestyle that fits elegantly into the real world.

Contrary to media myths, consumerism offers lives of sacrifice while simplicity offers lives of opportunity. Simplicity creates the opportunity for greater fulfillment in work, meaningful connection with others, feelings of kinship with all life, and awe of a living universe. This is a rich way of life that offers a compelling alternative to the stress, busyness, and alienation of the modern era.

If the material consumption of a fraction of humanity is already harming the planet, is there an alternative path that enables all of humanity to live more lightly upon the Earth while experiencing a higher quality of life? The insights described above offer a resounding answer: "Yes, there is!"

Follow Duane Elgin on Twitter: www.twitter.com/DuaneElgin

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/duane-elgin/simplicity-is-not-sacrifi_1_b_872475.html

June 8, 2011

Cambodian monks help protect rare turtles

New conservation project launched to help save rare giant soft-shell turtle from extinction.

AFP

KRATIE, Cambodia - Cambodian monks and environmentalists launched a new conservation project on Wednesday to help save one of the world's rarest and largest freshwater turtles from extinction.

A centre for the endangered Cantor's giant soft-shell turtle has been set up on the grounds of a temple near the central town of Kratie on the Mekong river, with support from wildlife group Conservation International.

"The turtle faces serious threats in its natural habitat," said Conservation International's Sun Yoeung, explaining that the centre would look after baby turtles.
"We hope they will have a better chance at survival when they are bigger and can protect themselves," he said.

The turtle, capable of growing up to 50 kg (110 pounds), was thought to be nearly extinct until it was rediscovered on an isolated stretch of the river in 2007.

At the opening ceremony for the centre, an orange-clad monk blessed a female Cantor's turtle weighing 18 kg (40 pounds) and released her into a large pond inside the temple complex, a popular tourist attraction in the area.

Staff at the facility hope to find her a mate soon to kick-start a breeding programme.

The centre is also home to nearly 100 baby turtles who were moved from their nests for their own protection.

"In one or two years we will release them back into the river," Sun Yoeung told AFP. "Now they are too small and they can be eaten by birds or fish."

The Cantor's turtle is also under threat from hunters and from the destruction of its habitat.

The animal spends 95 percent of its life hidden in sand or mud and is listed as endangered under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, the same status given to tigers and pandas.

It was discovered in an area closed off to scientists until the late 1990s because of decades of civil conflict in the country.

It is not known exactly how many of the creatures are left but since 2007, CI has protected 51 nests on the Mekong river and watched more than 1,000 turtles hatch successfully.

http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Asia/Story/A1Story20110608-283108.html

June 9, 2011

Pan African Interfaith Meeting Calls for Climate Justice and Sustainable Peace in Africa

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - More than 130 faith leaders, including traditional leaders, mainly from Africa but also from Northern Europe and Asia gathered in Nairobi this week to reflect on the position of faith groups towards the environment and humanity, with a particular emphasis on climate change and its effects on Africa.

The event that represented Muslims, Christians, Hindus, African traditional leaders, Bahá'í and Buddhist communities from 30 countries across Africa, was co-organized by the Southern
African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI), the All Africa Churches Conference (AACC) and the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCUMURA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) lent its logistical support.

The objective of the meeting was to prepare African religious leaders for the upcoming UNFCCC climate meeting (COP17) in December in Durban, South Africa, and to do the following:

- Develop a common framework for African Ecumenical action on climate justice and sustainable peace in Africa;
- Mobilize faith based organizations to understand and respond to climate justice and sustainable peace in Africa;
- Strengthen faith leaders' competences in climate justice and sustainable peace;
- Explore synergy with state and non-state actors in joint advocacy efforts on climate justice and sustainable peace in Africa;
- Present to the climate change negotiators the essential moral principles required to reach a fair and just climat agreement.

The organizers convened the meeting in time to plan concrete actions with particular interest to get religious and political leaders prepared for COP17 in order to make a significant step forward in the direction of a legally binding agreement.

"In Durban, African Faith Communities will have a tremendous authority, legitimacy and power to bring back to the climate negotiations a sense of responsibility, and we in UNEP and the UN family as a whole are ready to work with you, to assist you and equally to draw on you to assist us, to ensure that people will not lose faith in their own ability to make a difference," Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director told the meeting.

Africa has been highly impacted by the adverse effects of climate change: droughts, floods, shrinking of lakes and the dying of coral reefs as well as the depletion of the rain forests are sending strong warnings that the world cannot continue with its business as usual.

Climate change has serious effects on the agricultural sector as well as on the health of people. Conflicts over scarce natural resources have led to human migration into the cities. Parts of the employment sectors are already feeling the repercussions of climate change, such as among fishing and pastoral communities.

The faith leaders gathered in Nairobi called on world leaders to include climate change into their socio-political decisions. They want their voices heard in Durban so that COP 17 becomes also a peoples' COP and an African COP.

Increased awareness of the causes and consequences of climate change, adaptation and mitigation mechanisms as well as an increased number of individuals, churches, temples and mosques can make and promote lifestyle changes and choices towards responsible living by protecting the environment.
In his opening remarks Bishop Davies from South Africa expressed the feeling that politicians have failed the people, and that COP 17 needs to set the moral compass for the 21st century with the help of the world climate cup dealing with the future of life on planet.

"Many negotiators will say they believe in justice and equity, but when it comes to implementing it, it comes to naught. Climate change is a huge inequity for the planet, people, and Africa which is suffering most with only 4% of carbon emissions. With the declaration that we will be preparing, we call on world leaders to use principles and values in their negotiations. All faith communities share this message to return to ethical principles in the ordering of our societies and the caring of our planet. Africa can show the world that our relationships, our care for one another is more important than acquiring material possessions," he said.

Kenya's Vice President and Minister for Home Affairs, Kalonzo Musyoka, addressed the inter-faith meeting with a clear message that the world has indeed no choice but to listen. He stressed that Durban must adopt an agreement that will take climate change a step forward and Africa needs a just and equitable distribution of the burden of climate change.

The two-day meeting ended with a strong message to COP17 on climate justice for sustainable peace in Africa. Those attending underlined a commitment and responsibility of the faith leaders towards their communities and the world to make the threats of climate change widely understood.

At the end of the meeting, participants came up with a declaration which also carries a clear message to all world leaders, for example, to abandon GDP as an indicator of prosperity in favour of indicators that include human wellbeing, equality and the external environmental costs of human economies. It also carries several messages to Africa's political leaders such as to regain a united voice and abandon expedient allegiances with blocs that are scrambling to appropriate Africa's natural resources as well as to recognise in all policy statements that our long-term social and economic interests require the stability of our biophysical environment today.

The declaration states that: *Every human generation is faced by particular challenges and opportunities. If we do not secure a stable climate for the sake of future generations, we will be held accountable by them and judged by history. On this very critical issue of climate change, we must not fail. Every lost moment increases an irreversible threat to life on Earth.*


**June 9, 2011**

Br. David Andrews: The morality of fracking

By Rich Heffern
National Catholic Reporter
Holy Cross Br. David Andrews is a senior representative at Food and Water Watch, a consumer group based in Washington. He is former director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

Human illness, environmental contamination, serious animal illnesses, a danger to our food system: these are some of the discovered effects of hydraulic fracking, a now growing method of releasing natural gas for energy production.

Fracking involves injecting millions of gallons of pressurized water, chemicals, and sand into the earth to loosen shale to release natural gas. Headaches, dizziness, endocrine disruption, cancer, memory loss, complaints about gastrointestinal problems have been among the illnesses resulting from contact with fracking’s contaminated water. Evidence has mounted that earthquakes in Arkansas have resulted from using this method of gas recovery. Polluted water has harmed animals as well as humans. Some fracking has caused exploding wells.

The long term effects of fracking has yet to be discovered. It is a technique now being utilized in 34 states. In 2005 the EPA caved in to political pressure and got out of regulating fracking and did not require that the chemicals used be identified creating a loophole in the law promoted by Halliburton. Fracking was exempt from the Clean Water Act. It only takes low concentrations of benzene and diesel fuel, two compounds found in fracking studies, to lead to severe health and environmental consequences. Illnesses traced to fracking have been documented in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Colorado, Wyoming and Alabama. The water from fracking is a particular danger to rural communities in that it flows in waste treatment plants at a scale far beyond their capacity, thus leaving rural water resources vulnerable to contamination.

Most religious groups recognize moral principles such as the dignity of the human person, the care for creation and an appreciation of the welfare of animals. On all these concerns, fracking comes up short. It harms communities and harms creation. We don’t know what the long term effects will be, but we know enough to challenge that it benefits anyone except the corporations that make huge profits off of the energy production and does little for the health of people, animals and of nature.

So religious groups such as the Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia have advocated against this process. In early April, 2011, America, the national magazine of the Jesuits editorialized about very critically about it, parish leaders have held community meetings in their churches warning about it.

Denominations have organized the faith community to write letters to congress arguing that creation and communities are being put at risk by this practice. In a letter of a year ago (May 24, 2010) the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The National Council of Churches, USA, the Union for Reform Judaism, the United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church and others assert that the process poses a “threat to drinking water resource and is of concern to a growing number of communities.”

One region where fracking is on the increase is the Marcellus Shale gas field which spreads through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. These areas are among those areas
now being recognized for their fertile and growing regional food systems. As the local food systems grow so too does the threat from fracking.

Farmers are reporting that their livelihoods and landscapes are being destroyed and are under serious threat. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture quarantined 28 cattle that had come into wastewater from a fracking well that showed concentrations of chlorine, barium, magnesium, potassium, and radioactive strontium. Homeowners near fracked well sites complain about a host of frightening consequences from poisoned wells to sickened pets to debilitating illnesses.

The director of the Food Animal Residue Avoidance Databank, a group of animal science professors that tracks incidents of chemical contamination in livestock has reported that there are many requests from veterinarians dealing with exposure to contaminants, including the byproducts of fracking.

At least 596 chemicals are used in fracking, but the companies are not required by law to divulge the ingredients which are considered trade secrets. In Louisiana, 16 cows that drank fluid from a fracked well began bellowing, foaming and bleeding at the mouth, then dropped dead. The dangers are real and very dangerous.

Fracking is a method of extracting gas which has incredible dangers for which the moral remedy is that it be banned in the name of human dignity, environmental protection, and animal welfare.

http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/br-david-andrews-morality-fracking

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**June 10, 2011**

Pulling carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere can help limit the damage wrought by global warming

By Thomas E. Lovejoy
New York Times

Carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are pushing 400 parts per million (p.p.m.) — up from the natural pre-industrial level of 280 p.p.m. Emissions for last year were the highest ever. Rather than drift along until a calamity galvanizes the world, and especially the United States, into precipitous action, the time to act is now.

The biology of the planet indicates we are already in a danger zone. The goal of limiting temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius, as discussed at the Copenhagen and Cancun climate summits, is actually disastrous.

As we push the planet’s average temperature increase beyond 0.75°C, coral reefs (upon which 5 percent of humanity depends) are in increasing trouble. The balance of the coniferous forests of western North America has been tipped in favor of wood-boring bark beetles; in many places 70
percent of the trees are dead. The Amazon — which suffered the two greatest droughts in recorded history in 2005 and 2010 — teeters close to tipping into dieback, in which the southern and eastern parts of the forest die and turn into savannah vegetation. Estimates of sea-level rise continue to climb.

Even more disturbing, scientists have determined that, if we want to stop at a 2°C increase, global emissions have to peak in 2016. That seems impossible given current trends. Yet most people seem oblivious to the danger because of the lag time between reaching a greenhouse gas concentration level and the heat increase it will cause.

So what to do? One possibility is “geo-engineering” that essentially takes an engineering approach to the planet’s climate system. An example would be to release sulfates in large quantity into the atmosphere or do other things that would reflect back some of the incoming solar radiation.

There are serious flaws with most geo-engineering solutions because they treat the symptom (temperature) rather than the cause (elevated levels of CO2 and other greenhouse gases). That means the moment the solution falters or stops, the planet goes right back into the ever-warmer thermal envelope. Such “solutions” also neglect the oceans because elevated CO2 makes them more acidic. Further, any unintended consequences of global scale geo-engineering by definition will be planetary in scale.

It’s far better to address the cause of climate change by lowering concentrations of greenhouse gases to an acceptable level. That means going beyond reduction and elimination of emissions to things that can pull out some of the excess CO2. Fortunately, because living things are built of carbon, the biology of the planet is capable of just that.

At the moment, roughly half the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere comes from destruction and degradation of ecosystems over the past three centuries. A significant amount of CO2 can be withdrawn by ecosystem restoration on a planetary scale. That means reforestation, restoring degraded grasslands and pasturelands and practicing agriculture in ways that restore carbon to the soil. There are additional benefits: forests benefit watersheds, better grasslands provide better grazing and agricultural soils become more fertile. This must integrate with competing uses for land as the population grows, but fortunately it comes at a time of greater urbanization.

The power of ecosystem restoration to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide and avoid disruptive climate change is great but insufficient. We also need to use non-biological means to reduce atmospheric carbon. The barrier to the latter is simply cost, so a sensible move would be to initiate a crash program to find more economical ways. Some methods can build on natural processes that consume CO2, such as the weathering of rock and soil formation. Other methods could simply convert CO2 into an inert substance. For example, Vinod Khosla’s Calera experiment has demonstrated how to pull carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere by mixing it with seawater to produce cement.

All of this must take place as we strive for a future with low carbon energy sources and lower carbon transportation. It is in our own self-interest to manage ourselves, the planet and its
climate system in an integrated fashion. We can do so, and there are abundant economic possibilities in doing so, but the window of opportunity is closing rapidly.


June 12, 2011

Thriving in a Post-Consumerist Society

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

What does a thriving way of life look like in a post consumerist society? Many aspects of a thriving future can be found by stepping into a contemporary co-housing community or eco-village.

To illustrate, my wife and I lived in a co-housing community in Northern California for nearly two years. Our motivation was to explore an alternative to the alienation and isolation of a single-family dwelling and lifestyle and to see if there was a healthier and happier way of living in community with others. We did not move into a "commune" with shared income, personal lives and possessions. Instead, this was a setting that valued the privacy and integrity of people's individual lives while offering diverse ways of coming together in meaningful activities ranging from cooking and gardening to sharing common meals. Overall, we discovered a sense of kinship based, not on material status and consumption, but on neighborliness, shared values, and mutual regard. We also found a community that cared for all of its children, as well as for those aging and dying. Not to be left out was a generous sense of celebration for life with music and dance.

The three core organizing principles for the community are simplicity, family, and ecology. With 70 people (50 adults and 20 children), this was a scale of living small enough to create a genuine feeling of community and large enough to use our size to advantage. This co-housing community consists of 30 units in two-story flats and townhouses clustered in rows to establish a common green area on the interior and parking on the exterior. The common house is used as a dining area but is regularly transformed into a dance floor, meeting room, playroom and more. The common house also includes two guest rooms, an informal lending library and a playroom for kids on rainy or cold days.

As a community, we would typically eat together three evenings each week and often have a brunch on weekends. Each person participates in a three-person cooking crew roughly once a month, preparing food and cleaning-up for roughly 50 persons. People are also expected to participate in work crews such as landscaping, conflict resolution or kitchen maintenance. Every
other week there are meetings to run the workings of the community. Happily, these are run efficiently and expertly, attendance is high and much is accomplished. This eco-village has a half-dozen commercial spaces connected with it, so it combines a residential community with commercial enterprises.

Beyond the formal activities of operating a co-housing community are the informal ones that brought us together in meaningful relationships. We easily and quickly organized diverse activities ranging from fundraisers (such as a brunch for tsunami disaster relief), to arranging classes (such as yoga and Cajun dancing) and creating community celebrations and events. Again and again, we saw diverse gatherings and initiatives emerge from the combined strengths and diverse talents of the community.

Envisioning a future of sustainable prosperity, diverse families will live in an "eco-home" that is nested within an "eco-village," that, in turn, is nested within an "eco-city," and so on up to the scale of the bio-region, nation, and world. Each eco-village of 100 -200 persons could have a distinct character, architecture, and local economy. Common to many of these new villages could be a child-care facility and play area, an organic garden, a common house for community meetings, celebrations, and regular meals together, a recycling and composting area, an open space, and a crafts and shop area. As well, each could offer a variety of types of work to the local economy such as child care, aging care, organic gardening, green building, conflict resolution and other skills that provide fulfilling employment for many. These micro-communities represent unique expressions of thriving sustainability as they provide meaningful work, raise healthy children, celebrate life in community with others and live in a way that honors the Earth and future generations.

A new village movement could transform urban life around the world. Drawing inspiration from co-housing and eco-villages, a flowering of diverse, neighborhood-scale communities could replace the alienating landscape of today's massive cities and homogeneous suburbs. Eco-villages could provide a practical scale and foundation for a sustainable future and become important islands of security, camaraderie, learning and innovation in a world of sweeping change. These human-sized living environments encourage diverse experiments in cooperative living that touch the Earth lightly and are uniquely adapted each locale.

Although eco-villages are designed for sustainable living, there is not the time to retrofit and rebuild our existing urban infrastructure around this approach to living before we encounter a world in systems crisis. Climate disruption, energy shortages, financial breakdowns, and other critical trends will overtake us long before we can make a sweeping overhaul in the design and functioning of cities and towns that have been a century or more in the making. We can regard eco-villages and co-housing communities as greenhouses of human invention, learn from their experiments, and adapt their designs and principles for successful living.

Without the time to retrofit cities into well-designed "green villages," we must make the most of the urban infrastructure that already exists. Creatively adapting ourselves to this new world will produce a wave of innovations for local living -- technical, social, architectural and more. An experimental and daring new village movement will emerge as the existing urban architecture is transformed into human-scale designs for sustainable and thriving forms of living. Overall, in creating healthier ways of living, a new village movement based upon the sanity of simplicity, a
strong ecological consciousness and respect for children and family, will play a vital role in building a future of sustainable prosperity.

An important resource for exploring this further is the "Global Ecovillage Network" or GEN. For the United States, see the Cohousing Association.

Follow Duane Elgin on Twitter: www.twitter.com/DuaneElgin

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/duane-elgin/simplicity-is-not-sacrifi_b_868482.html

June 13, 2011

Eco-friendly mosque planned for Germany

Norderstedt's Muslim community to build a £2m mosque with wind turbines in its minarets

By Siobhan Dowling
Guardian

A small Muslim community in northern Germany is pioneering renewable energy sources by planning to build a mosque with wind turbines in its minarets.

The €2.5m (£2.2m) project would see the mosque in Norderstedt, near Hamburg, become one of the first to turn the minaret, the place from which the muezzin called the faithful to prayer, into a wind-fuelled power source.

The eco-friendly building is the brainchild of the Hamburg architect Selcuk Ünyilmaz, who has long incorporated energy efficiency into his work. "I thought about how we could give sacral architecture an ecological focus," he said. "My design combines the modern with the traditional, so I wanted to give the minarets a contemporary function."

The wind turbines will be housed in two 22-metre-high minarets and Ünyilmaz plans to install a pair of 1.5-metre glass rotor blades in each tower. At certain times of the day light will be beamed at the blades to create a kind of light show.

Until now the 200-strong congregation, part of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, has made do with a 100-year-old building ill-equipped to house a religious community. But last month local authorities approved plans for the project, which will measure about 1,300 sq metres and comprise two parts, the mosque and a larger building containing shops, travel agents, a café, hairdresser and offices.

"We want to create a meeting place for people from all religions and nationalities," Uğur Sütcü, the chairman of the Norderstedt congregation, told the Hamburger Abendblatt newspaper. "There will be advisory services on offer, as well as social, cultural and sporting activities."
In order to persuade some of the more sceptical members of the congregation of the merits of his the design, Ünyilmaz looked for other mosques with similar wind turbines. But he could not find any other examples that had already been built.

The German mosque will not be the first of its kind, however, as the Islamic missionary group Tablighi Jamaat is also planning to build an environmentally friendly mosque with wind turbines in its minarets in time for the London 2012 Olympics.

Ünyilmaz's scheme has come at a fortuitous time. Germany has approved a 2022 exit from nuclear energy and there is pressure to make up the shortfall by boosting the renewable energy sector.

The community in Norderstedt might be in tune with the energy zeitgeist but does not yet have funds for the project. However this is not something Sütcü is too worried about. "We are confident that we can raise the money," he said.

The coastal town is perfectly situated for wind energy production, and the minarets will help cover the building's overheads, providing about a third of its energy. Ünyilmaz said that was one of the reasons he opted for turbines instead of solar panels, which would not produce electricity at night. "We are in the north and I don't think there's a day here that isn't windy," he said.


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June 14, 2011

India Aims $1 Billion at Sacred but Filthy Ganges

By Nida Najar
New York Times

NEW DELHI — Indian officials signed an agreement with the World Bank on Tuesday to use a $1 billion loan to finance the first major new effort in more than 20 years to cleanse the revered Ganges, one of the world’s dirtiest rivers.

One-third of India’s 1.2 billion people live along the banks of the 1,560-mile-long river, many of them relying on it for drinking, cooking and washing. Millions more visit for ritual baths to cleanse themselves of sin. But untreated sewage, agricultural runoff and industrial waste have fouled its waters for decades, and hydroelectric projects and dams threaten to choke off its waters in spots.

On Tuesday, a religious leader on a hunger strike over the effect of illegal mining on the state of the river, Swami Nigamanand, died after spending weeks in a coma..
The long-awaited loan is part of a government project that aims to halt the discharge of untreated wastewater into the river by 2020. The project, founded in 2009, replaced the 1986 Ganga Action Plan, the last large-scale attempt to address the pollution. That initiative was able to introduce waste water treatment in certain areas, it failed to halt raw waste disposal into the Ganges. Critics said it was inadequately financed and poorly managed.

Indian officials and representatives of the World Bank said Tuesday that they hoped the new project would be more successful. They cited the greater amount of money being invested, the broader focus on regional environmental health and a planned public education campaign.

“What we’re trying to do is take a step back and not look at just one sector — waste water — but take a larger sectoral approach,” said Genevieve Connors, a water resources specialist for the World Bank who is involved in the project.

But she noted that the task of cleaning a river was enormous, saying it “takes decades and costs hundreds of billions of dollars.”

Indian officials acknowledge that the Ganges is just one of many rivers that present public health problems. “Most of India’s rivers have become sewers,” said the environment minister, Jairam Ramesh. “We have to now really bring water into rivers.”

Japan helped to finance a cleanup project in the Yamuna River, the largest tributary to the Ganges, in 1993. But that project has largely failed to make a dent in the river’s pollution.


June 15, 2011

Direct action against Ganga mining mafias: Jairam

The Hindu

On Tuesday, India signed a deal for a $1-billion loan from the World Bank to clean up the Ganga. Just a day earlier, in a tragic coincidence, a 34-year old swami died after a four month-long hunger strike, protesting the mining mafia illegally quarrying in the river.

Besieged with questions about Swami Nigamanand's death at the official function to sign the World Bank deal, Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh blamed the Uttarakhand government and promised Central government action against the mafias. “In view of the fact that the State government has demonstrated a continued reluctance to take action against illegal mining, I think, we will have no option but to invoke Section 5 of the Environment Protection Act and take action on our own,” he told journalists. That Section gives the Centre “power to direct the closure, prohibition or regulation of any industry”.
Probe team

So far, Mr. Ramesh's Ministry has chosen to exhort the State government, rather than taking direct action. On January 6 last year, the Minister says, he sent a letter to Chief Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal “Nishank,” asking him to take steps to end illegal sand mining in the Ganga at Haridwar. “Unfortunately, no action was coming from the State government over the last 15 or 16 months,” said Mr. Ramesh. He adds that on December 9, 2009, he sent an investigation team to Haridwar, and gave the Chief Minister a copy of its report and recommendations.

“According to law, minor minerals are a responsibility of the State government [and] major minerals are a responsibility of the Central government,” he said.

Swami Nigamanand of the Haridwar-based Matri Sadan Ashram died after a record 114-day hunger strike demanding that quarrying in the Ganga be stopped, and alleging government corruption in aid of the mafia.

“Rampant in Uttarakhand”

“I am extremely sorry that the swami, who was fasting, has died. It should not have happened,” said Mr. Ramesh. “I myself have been to Matri Sadan twice and I have told the Chief Minister on a number of occasions that illegal mining is rampant in Uttarakhand, that illegal mining enjoys political patronage at the highest levels…But no action was taken.”

http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/article2105361.ece

June 16, 2011

UN environment agency sees work with faith groups, African cleric says

By Fredrick Nzwili
Ecumenical News International

Nairobi, Kenya - The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) is looking forward to working with the faith communities in Africa on environmental issues, retired South African Anglican Bishop Geoffrey Davies said.

The bishop's comments follow faith groups' interaction with the agency from June 7-8 at its headquarters here during a preparatory meeting for the 17th Conference of Parties (COP-17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to be held in Durban, South Africa, in November.

"UNEP said to us ... that they hoped they could work with faith communities in the future, not only in preparation for COP-17, but for Rio+20 (the United Nations conference on sustainable development to be held in Rio de Janeiro) in 2012 where the U.N. Conventions on Biodiversity and Desertification will be raised in addition to climate change," Davies told ENInews.
UNEP, which coordinates the United Nations' environmental activities, assisting developing countries in implementing environmentally sound practices, was founded in 1972.

Davies is executive director of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environmental Institute (SAFCEI), an organization based in Cape Town, South Africa, that unites the faiths through a commitment to earth-keeping and supports their fulfillment of environmental and socio-economic responsibility. At the moment, according to Davies, the organization is bridging the divide between different world faiths, and the divide that has existed between faiths and environmentalists.

He said there was a need for a new direction in governance, a "new green deal" (programs to restore natural systems) for economics, as well as a focus on water, energy and provision of enough food for all.

"It is UNEP's hope that the faith communities can actually provide inspiration and direction in these processes, which are not succeeding at present," said Davies, who initiated the faiths conference at UNEP, which called for binding targets and a renewed moral vision in the climate change negotiations.

Achim Steiner, UNEP's executive director, told delegates that it is vital that a spirit of cooperation, rather than competition, prevails in climate talks. "In the climate negotiations, the world's people are being silenced by arguments, facts and figures that are disempowering ... You have immense power to bring back a sense of responsibility to these negotiations," he said on June 7.

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81808_128709_ENG HTM.htm

June 18, 2011

Jairam Ramesh takes up Ganga crusader's cause

By Nitin Sethi
Times of India

NEW DELHI: Union environment minister Jairam Ramesh has gone ahead and paved the legal ground to regulate development work along 135 kilometres of the Bhagirathi river from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi after the Uttarakhand government failed to do so.

In a letter to the BJP chief minister of the hill state, Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, the Union environment minister has pointed out that a decision to do so was taken in the former's presence at the National Ganga River Basin Authority headed by the Prime Minister.

Ramesh noted that he had written several reminders to the CM to follow up on the decision but had not got any response.
Under the Environment Protection Act, the minister has now proposed to turn 100 metres on either side of the river for the 135-km stretch as an 'eco-sensitive zone' which will allow the Centre to regulate all kind of development projects in the belt. The proposed notification will be finalized in 60 days.

Ramesh has proposed that no hydroelectric dams of more than 25 MW would be allowed on the stretch and water will not be extracted for industries. Mining too will be banned. The state government will have to secure approval for a zonal development plan for the region from the environment ministry before it permits any development activity along the river belt.

Ramesh's decision comes days after he blamed the Uttarakhand government for the death of Swami Nigamanand fasting against illegal mining in the Ganga. On Friday, Ramesh wrote another letter to Nishank reminding him that he had several times in the past asked the Uttarakhand government to take action against the illegal stone mining in the river bed but the state government failed to act.

In his letter, Ramesh refrained from threatening to intervene and stop mining under environment laws as he had done previously. But the state BJP unit warned him against intervening using the Environment Protection Act, calling it an attack on federalism.

In his fresh missive, Ramesh told Nishank that "the mining is in violation of the provisions of the Environment Protection Act, 2006", suggesting mildly that he holds the powers to intervene for violation of a central Act. But he has written, "The powers to frame rules to control illegal mining have been delegated to state governments. I also request that the environment ministry be kept informed of the actions taken by the state government (to stop illegal mining)."


June 20, 2011

Why Climate Change Requires A Consciousness Change

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

Einstein famously said that we cannot solve problems with the same level of perception that created them. We have to step up to a higher and more inclusive level of seeing what is going on in order to understand and solve great challenges. Certainly climate disruption represents one of the greatest tests humanity has ever faced because it is a much higher level problem than the actions which have created it: countless local actions (driving cars, running factories, etc.) have produced global consequences that respect no national boundaries and that imperil our collective future.

Here is how James Speth, former head of the Council on Environmental Quality and a top Washington policy maker, describes the up-leveling of perception required: "I used to think the
top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation, and eco-system collapse. but I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation." The transformation that Speth speaks about is a shift to a higher level of attention and seeing the world from a more objective vantage point with a witnessing or reflective consciousness.

Simply stated, what is required is a shift from an "embedded consciousness" that is locked inside the habits of our thinking mind to a more spacious "reflective consciousness" that enables us to become a fair witness or objective observer of our lives. This does not mean we stop thinking; instead, we stand back and, without judgment, simply watch what we are thinking and how we are relating to both the world and ourselves.

An up-leveling of our attention to a more reflective or witnessing consciousness makes an important difference in the flow of our lives. We are less bound by habitual and pre-programmed ways of perceiving and responding when we are consciously watchful of ourselves in the process of living. As we witness ourselves moving through daily life, we begin to cut through confining self-images, social pretenses and psychological barriers and begin to live more voluntarily and choicefully. The ability to witness the unfolding of our lives is so ordinary that it is easy to overlook. An old adage states, "It's a rare fish that knows it swims in water." In a similar way, we humans seldom recognize the power and importance of a witnessing or reflective consciousness. To clarify, let me to ask: Have you been conscious of sitting here reading this blog? Did you unintentionally allow your thoughts to wander to other concerns? Did you just experience a slight shock of self-recognized when I inquired? What does it feel like to notice yourself reading while you read? To observe yourself eating while you eat? To notice yourself talking while you talk?

As our familiarity with this mode of attention increases, we get lost in thought and worldly activities less frequently. This is not a mechanical watchfulness; rather it involves making friends with ourselves and accepting the totality of who we are with all of our faults, foibles, and unique gifts. In living more consciously, we are able to notice our habitual patterns of thought and behavior, both personally and socially. We are more able to penetrate through the political posturing, glib advertisements, and cultural myths that sustain the status quo. We are also able to respond more quickly to subtle feedback that something is amiss. We do not have to be shocked or bludgeoned into remedial action by, for example, massive famines or catastrophic climate disruption; instead, more subtle signals suffice to indicate that corrective actions are warranted.

A reflective or witnessing or consciousness also promotes a feeling of connection with the rest of life. We begin to see and sense our intimate relationship with all of life and this, in turn, naturally fosters feelings of compassion and caring. As we expand our interior learning to match our technological advances, we develop an inner maturation that is more equal to the enormous technological development that has occurred over the last several centuries.

Returning to Einstein's insight, climate disruption and other crises are moving the capacity for a reflective or witnessing consciousness from the status of a spiritual luxury for the few to a social necessity for the many. This simple though profound transformation in consciousness is not confined to our personal lives. The human family is acquiring a witnessing or reflective consciousness at lightning speed as the growth of television and the Internet enable us to become
a collective witness to our own journey. By joining the deep but fragmented communication of the Internet with the broad but shallow communication of television, we are transforming our global capacity to witness our collective behavior and future. Working together, these tools are creating a broad and deep capacity for attention and collective conversation as a species. With the combined power of our communications technologies, we are fostering a new level of collective consciousness that can overcome our apathy, selfishness, and greed and enable us to discover a common future of sustainable prosperity. We are a witnessing species. Assisted by the communications revolution, we are becoming more fully awake and able to respond with to the supreme test of climate change from a higher level of perception and understanding.

Follow Duane Elgin on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/DuaneElgin](http://www.twitter.com/DuaneElgin)


June 18, 2011

Tar sands destruction hits home, but the world stands UP!

By Melina Laboucan-Massimo
Green Peace

The impact of the tar sands really hit home for me last month, when a pipeline ruptured, in what was one of the largest oil spills in Alberta’s history only 7 km from where my family lives. Over 28,000 barrels of oil from a pipeline spilled throughout the forest and into the muskeg. The school in the community was suspended for over a week due to the pervasive noxious odors in the community.

This photo essay (below right) tells that story, and how it is connected to a longer history of destruction and exploitation on the Lubicon Cree’s traditional lands.

So it was particularly important for me to be part of the International Days of Action Against the Tar Sands that we kicked off today here in Alberta. It’s also great to know that similar events are taking place in over 20 countries in Europe, 25 cities across the United States, 12 cities in Canada, and as far as New Zealand and Australia.

All across the globe we see people standing up and saying NO to this type of dirty fossil fuel development. People are recognizing that the world does not want or need tar sands. And in reality we simply cannot afford it – locally nor globally.

On the steps of the Alberta Legislature where many of the decisions are made about tar sands expansion we held a rally to say to this government that we do not support their unabated and irresponsible management of the tar sands here in Alberta.

Nor is my community unique: We see oil spills around the world from the Gulf Coast of Mexico, Norway’s arctic north to the Kalamazoo River in Michigan.
We have a choice – we have a choice to turn away from this path. We need a just renewable energy path. One that will not rob our future generations of the fundamental pillars of life: Clean air, Good water, and a Healthy Environment for ALL.

Photo Essay:

Melina Laboucan-Massimo, a member of the Lubicon Cree First Nation and a Climate and Energy Campaigner with Greenpeace, describes the impact of oil and gas developments and the recent oil spill in the traditional territory of the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta. To view this photo essay, visit:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz3nSscXaml&feature=share%5C


June 22, 2011

Updates from the Indigenous Tar Sands Campaign

ClimateConnections.org

ACFN members protest Municipal Council’s refusal to meet with its Chief and Council about creation of outstanding reserve lands

Fort Chipewyan - Today the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) Chief and council, band members and local Fort Chipewyan residents are holding a peaceful protest on the steps of the Provincial Building in Fort McMurray, Alberta on from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm to draw attention to unresolved treaty land issues and treaty infringements made by both the provincial and federal governments. In addition, ACFN hopes this rally will inform the public about the arbitrary and disrespectful manner in which the Regional Municipality has treated the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation.

This protest was prompted by ACFN’s recent application for lands in the hamlet of Fort Chipewyan to be transferred to reserve status under outstanding treaty land entitlement. However, a letter from Deputy Mayor Scott dated May 26, 2011 stated he was unwilling to meet with First Nation leadership to discuss the creation of these outstanding and rightfully owed reserve lands. According to Chief Allan Adam of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, “This request arises from our attempt to achieve meaningful Treaty rights and to settle a long standing court dispute between the First Nation and Canada based on events from the 1950’s and 60’s.”

The transfer of these lands to Reserve status is supported by local residents in Fort Chipewyan, including the Mikisew Cree First Nation, the Metis Local, as well as the Government of
Chief Allan Adam has asked Mayor Blake to meet to talk about this issue for the last three years. His requests from 2008, 2009 and 2010 have gone unanswered and the only response has been the May 26th refusal by the Regional Municipality to talk about the issue.

According to Deputy Mayor Scott “the [ACFN] proposal does not advance the interests of the hamlet or the residents generally”. In response Chief Adam remarks, “We are offended by the Deputy Mayor’s presumption that he knows what is best for the residents of Fort Chipewyan, 80% of whom are Aboriginal. The Deputy Mayor’s comments smack of the paternalism that we hoped was long since dead.”

Chief Allan lamented “Our Council and our community members are offended by the lack of respect shown by the Deputy Mayor. He made this decision without meeting with us and without the consent of the two Fort Chipewyan Municipal Councillors. Furthermore, we had hopes of meeting with the Mayor so we could educate her and the Council about our plans, which will result in important benefits for our community, settle a pending court case, and address the concerns of the Municipal Council. It saddens me to have to take this approach, but it appears to be the only way to get the attention of the Regional Municipality.”

Chief Allan further states, “We are also exploring other legal and political initiatives. This issue is not going away”. 


June 23, 2011

The Future Doesn't Hurt. Yet

By Matthieu Ricard
New York Times

When, in the early morning, I sit in the little meadow in front of my hermitage on a quiet hilltop, two hours’ drive from Katmandu in Nepal, my eyes take in hundreds of miles of lofty Himalayan peaks glowing in the rising sun. The serenity of the scenery blends naturally and seamlessly with the peace within. It is a long way indeed from the frantic city life I once lived.

But the peace I know is no escape from the world below — or the science I once studied. I work with the toughest problems of the real world in the 30 clinics and schools that Karuna-Shechen, the foundation I created with a few dedicated friends and benefactors, runs in Tibet, Nepal and India. And now, after 40 years among these majestic mountains, I have become acutely aware of
the ravages of climate change in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau. From where I sit in my little meadow, it is especially sad to witness the Himalayan peaks becoming grayer and grayer as glaciers melt and snows recede.

The debate about climate change is mostly conducted by people who live in cities, where everything is artificial. They don’t actually experience the changes that are taking place in the real world. The vast majority of Tibetans, Nepalese and Bhutanese who live on both sides of the Himalayas have never heard of global warming, as they have little or no access to the news media. Yet they all say that the ice is not forming as thickly as before on lakes and rivers, that winter temperatures are getting warmer and the spring blossoms are coming earlier. What they may not know is that these are symptoms of far greater dangers.

In the beautiful kingdom of Bhutan, where I spent nine years, recent investigations by the only glaciologist in the country, Kharma Thoeb, have shown that a natural moraine dam that separates two glacial lakes in the Lunana area is today only 31 meters deep, in comparison to 74 meters in 2003. If this wall gives way, some 53 million cubic meters of water will rush down the valley of Punakha and Wangdi, causing immense damage and loss of life. Altogether there are 400 glacial lakes in Nepal and Bhutan that may break their natural dams and flood populated areas lower in the valleys. If these floods occur, the glaciers will increasingly shrink. This will cause drought, since the streams and rivers will not be fed by melting snow.

Chinese climatologists have called the Himalayan glaciers and other major mountains located in the Tibetan plateau the “third pole” of our ailing planet. There are 40,000 large and small glaciers on the Tibetan plateau and this area is melting at a rate three to four times faster than the North and South Poles. The melting is particularly accelerated in the Himalayas by the pollution that settles on the snow and darkens the glaciers, making them more absorbent to light.

According to international development agencies, about half of the populations of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, India and Pakistan depend on the watershed from the rivers of the Tibetan plateau for their agriculture, general water supply, and, therefore, survival. The consequences of the drying up of these great rivers will be catastrophic.

When I was 20, I was hired as a researcher in the cellular genetics lab of François Jacob, who had just been awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine. There, I worked for six years toward my doctorate. Life was far from dull, but something essential was missing.

Everything changed in Darjeeling in northern India in 1967, when I met several remarkable human beings who, for me, exemplified what a fulfilled human life can be. These Tibetan masters, all of whom had just fled the Communist invasion of Tibet, radiated inner goodness, serenity and compassion. Returning from this first journey, I became aware that I’d found a reality that could inspire my whole life and give it direction and meaning. In 1972, I decided to move to Darjeeling, in the shadow of the Himalayas, to study with the great Tibetan masters Kangyur Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

In India and then in Bhutan, I lived a beautiful and simple life. I came to understand that while some people may be naturally happier than others, their happiness is still vulnerable and incomplete; that achieving durable happiness as a way of being requires sustained effort in training the mind and developing qualities like inner peace, mindfulness and altruistic love.
Then one day in 1979, shortly after our monastery in Nepal had been equipped with a phone line, someone called me from France to ask if I would like to engage in a dialogue with my father, the philosopher Jean-François Revel. I said “of course,” but thought that I would never hear from the person again, as I did not believe that my father, a renowned agnostic, would ever want to dialogue with a Buddhist monk, even one who was his son. But to my surprise, he readily accepted and we spent a wonderful 10 days in Nepal, discussing many issues about the meaning of life. That was the end of my quiet, anonymous life and the beginning of a different way of interacting with the world. The book that followed, The Monk and the Philosopher, became a bestseller in France and was translated into 21 languages.

It dawned on me that much more money than I had ever envisioned having would be coming my way. Since I could not see myself acquiring an estate in France or somewhere else, it seemed to me that the most natural thing to do would be to donate all the proceedings and rights of that and subsequent books to helping others. The foundation I created for that purpose is now called Karuna-Shechen, and it implements and maintains humanitarian and educational projects throughout Asia.

Humanitarian projects have since become a central focus of my life and, with a few dedicated volunteer friends and generous benefactors, and under the inspiration of the abbot of my monastery, Rabjam Rinpoche, we have built and run clinics and schools in Tibet, Nepal and India where we treat about 100,000 patients a year and provide education to nearly 10,000 children. We have managed to do this spending barely 4 percent of our budget on overhead expenses.

My life has definitely become more hectic, but I have also discovered over the years that trying to transform oneself to better transform the world brings lasting fulfillment and, above all, the irreplaceable boon of altruism and compassion.

Imagine a ship that is sinking and needs all the available power to run the pumps to drain out the rising waters. The first class passengers refuse to cooperate because they feel hot and want to use the air-conditioner and other electrical appliances. The second-class passengers spend all their time trying to be upgraded to first-class status. The boat sinks and the passengers all drown. That is where the present approach to climate change is leading.

Whether people realize it or not, their actions can have disastrous effects — as the environmental changes in the Himalayas, the Arctic circle and many other places are showing us. The unbridled consumerism of our planet’s richest 5 percent is the greatest contributor to the climate change that will bring the greatest suffering to the most destitute 25 percent, who will face the worst consequences. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, on average an Afghan produces 0.02 tons of CO2 per year, a Nepalese and a Tanzanian 0.1, a Briton 10 tons, an American 19 and a Qatari 51 tons, which is 2,500 times more than an Afghan.

Unchecked consumerism operates on the premise that others are only instruments to be used and that the environment is a commodity. This attitude fosters unhappiness, selfishness and contempt upon other living beings and upon our environment. People are rarely motivated to change on behalf of something for their future and that of the next generation. They imagine, “Well, we’ll deal with that when it comes.” They resist the idea of giving up what they enjoy just for the sake of avoiding disastrous long-term effects. The future doesn’t hurt — yet.
An altruistic society is one in which we do not care only for ourselves and our close relatives, but for the quality of life of all present members of society, while being mindfully concerned as well by the fate of coming generations.

In particular, we need to make significant progress concerning the way we treat animals, as objects of consumption and industrial products, not as living beings who strive for well-being and want to avoid suffering. Every year, more than 150 billion land animals are killed in the world for human consumption, as well as some 1.5 trillion sea animals. In rich countries, 99 percent of these land animals are raised and killed in industrial farms and live only a fraction of their life expectancy. In addition, according to United Nations and FAO reports on climate change, livestock production is responsible for a greater proportion of emissions (18 percent) of greenhouse gases than the entire global transportation sector. One solution may be to eat less meat!

As the Dalai Lama has often pointed out, interdependence is a central Buddhist idea that leads to a profound understanding of the nature of reality and to an awareness of global responsibility. Since all beings are interrelated and all, without exception, want to avoid suffering and achieve happiness, this understanding becomes the basis for altruism and compassion. This in turn naturally leads to the attitude and practice of nonviolence toward human beings and animals — and toward the environment.

Matthieu Ricard was a scientist in cell genetics 40 years ago when he decided to live in the Himalayas and become a Buddhist monk. He is a photographer and the author of several books, including “Happiness: How to Cultivate Life’s Most Important Skill.” He lives in Nepal and has been involved in more than 100 humanitarian projects.


Summer 2011

Cry, Wolf

How a Campaign of Fear and Intimidation Led to the Gray Wolf’s Removal from the Endangered Species List

By James William Gibson
Earth Island Journal

“Nabeki” didn’t expect everyone to love her when, in September 2009, she founded the website “Howling for Justice” to celebrate the return of gray wolves to the Northern Rocky Mountains and to protest the then-pending wolf hunts in Montana and Idaho. She didn’t expect to fear for her life, either. But after she posted the names of Montana wolf hunters on her site, the threats began. On a single day in February 2010 the anti-wolf movement sent to her 3,000 messages. Some of the e-mails expressed their desire for her to leave the Rockies immediately. Some messages contained graphic descriptions of wolf killing clearly meant to cause her anguish.
“When I pulled the trigger, I think I saw the wolf cry,” one person wrote. “Then it’s [sic] guts where [sic] blown onto the hillside and it moaned.” A few of the messages hinted at attacking her personally.

“Until that day I wasn’t thinking about the hatred,” Nabeki, a professional from California who moved to the Rockies 15 years ago, told me. Nabeki is an Internet ID, a pseudonym that she asked me to maintain since she fears for her safety. “The idea that someone can hate you that much and not even know you is really daunting. It was the first time I got really scared. To this day I’m still scared.” What bothers her the most, though, is the sense that no one outside the Northern Rockies grasps the peril wolf advocates face. “I don’t know if people realize how serious a culture war this really is.”

For the last few years, a new version of an old war against the American gray wolf has raged in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Almost two decades ago, spurred by environmental activists with a vision of restoring a historic wolf population that had been extirpated, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) captured 66 wolves in Canada and released them into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, where they flourished. To naturalists, wolf reintroduction seemed morally right, a chance to remedy a previous generation’s crime of wolf extermination.

But to many in the region, the resurgence of wolves became a source of rage. Wolves killed livestock, infuriating ranchers. Many hunters saw the wolves as competitors for deer and elk. Yet the fury against wolves went deeper than what the animals actually did. For decades, the Rocky Mountain states have been the center of an extreme right-wing culture that celebrates the image of man as “warrior,” recognizes only local and state governance as legitimate, and advocates resistance – even armed resistance – against the federal government. To members of this culture, wolf reintroduction became a galvanizing symbol of perceived assaults on their personal freedom. Resistance was imperative. But whereas attacking the federal government could lead to prison, killing wolves was a political goal within reach – something the individual warrior could do. So advocating for the killing of wolves became a proxy battle, an organizing tool to reach out to all those angry about environmental regulations, gun laws, and public land policies. Since the early 2000s, and with increasing virulence since 2009, anti-wolf activists have promoted the image of wolves as demons – disease-ridden, dangerous, and foreign.

The fear-driven demagogy has worked. Afraid for their lives, pro-wolf voices like Nabeki have retreated from speaking out at public forums. Mainstream hunters, ranchers, loggers, and politicians from both political parties have signed onto the anti-wolf stance. With the public debate dominated by wolf paranoia – and fearful of wider losses across the West – conservation groups were pushed into a legal compromise that ultimately failed.

The result is an impending slaughter. On April 11, Congress removed gray wolves in Montana and Idaho from the endangered species list and legislated that in those two states, plus Wyoming, all but 300 to 450 of the region’s estimated 1,650 wolves may be killed. The remaining wolves will not necessarily disappear as a regional species,
but their small numbers mean they will become “ecologically extinct,” serving no function within the mountain ecosystem. How this all happened is yet another example of a dysfunctional political system in which fear – both irrational fear and fear harnessed for political gain – determines policy.

Every war has its warriors, and Toby Bridges is in the vanguard of the campaign against wolves – an unmatched propagandist, agitator, and organizer. When I met him in January at Perkins Restaurant in Missoula, Montana he was dressed the part in faded green hunting clothes, his graying hair cut short. A manufacturer’s representative for muzzle-loading rifles, Bridges grew up in the Midwest, but visited Montana for decades to camp and hunt. In 2007, he moved to Missoula with his wife. By then, some 500 wolves lived in packs scattered among the mountains. Bridges claims that their presence had utterly altered the state he loved. “I went to places where I’d been ten to 12 years ago and the game just wasn’t there. Instead I saw lots of piles of wolf scat.”

The idea that environmental groups and the Endangered Species Act had “forced [Montana] to have too many wolves” enraged him. “I didn’t move out here to Montana to watch it all die and I don’t mind being pushy,” he told me. In 2009, he founded Lobowatch.com, a website on which he posted furious anti-wolf essays.

As it happened, 2009 was a pivotal time for wolves in the Rocky Mountains. Because the animals had flourished, the USFWS “delisted” them as endangered and returned their “management” to state governments in Montana and Idaho. (Wyoming was excluded because it hadn’t developed a USFWS-approved management plan.) Both states responded by holding hunts in which several hundred wolves were killed. In response, a coalition of 14 national and local environmental groups (including the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife) sued the USFWS, arguing that the agency had violated the Endangered Species Act by subdividing the Northern Rocky wolf population into two groups, when the wolves in all three states represented a distinct population. In August 2010, federal judge Donald Molloy ruled in the conservation groups’ favor, and Montana and Idaho were forced to cancel upcoming hunts.

The court ruling infuriated a right wing already inflamed by the election of Barack Obama. On Lobowatch, Bridges escalated his rhetoric. “It’s time to fight dirty,” he wrote, then informed readers that xylitol, a readily available artificial sweetener, causes canines to lose coordination, suffer seizures, and die. “If Donald Molloy goes against the wishes of today’s hunters, there’s going to be a whole lot of very sweet [elk and deer] gut piles and wolf carcasses dotting the landscape this fall.”

Bridges also set out to strengthen some important alliances. One was with Gary Marbut, who serves as the executive director of the Montana Shooting Sports Association, a powerful lobbying group in Montana that promotes a broad right-wing agenda including bills legalizing noise suppressors while hunting, formation of state militia groups, and a law prohibiting federal law enforcement from making arrests without a local sheriff’s approval. Bridges also connected with Montana State Senator Joe Balyeat, a Bozeman Republican who is an extremely conservative states’ and county rights advocate and an avid bow hunter.
positions of influence, Bridges began addressing hunting groups and publishing on hunting websites such as Black Bear Blog. And he enlisted the support of Jim Beers, a former USFWS agent whose leadership in the “Wise Use” movement – which employs a certain interpretation of the Bible to advocate for increased exploitation of public lands – had made him famous in the region.

Montana’s anti-wolf alliance of ranchers, hunters, and militia sympathizers is built around some shared myths that focus on the evils of wolves in general and the Rockies’ wolves specifically. The anti-wolf movement asserts that because the reintroduced wolves were captured in Canada, they are foreign – alien and un-American. When we met at a Missoula pizza parlor, Gary Marbut described Canadian wolves as “an invasive subspecies” that spread out from Yellowstone and Central Idaho and “bumped off and wiped out an indigenous species of wolf that were smaller, had different pack structures, and hunted differently.” To “prove” this, websites like Lobowatch regularly run pictures of large, fierce-looking wolves looking ready to attack.

These “foreign” wolves also have brought disease, specifically *E. granulosus*, a tapeworm, the myth asserts. “Wolves in the Rockies dispense billions of microscopic eggs in air and water,” Marbut said. “When they get into people they cause cysts ... that can be fatal. We are at risk in Montana.”

Anti-wolf advocates also believe that it’s only a matter of time before these foreign, disease-ridden wolves attack humans. In 2010, numerous Internet postings told of elk hunters surrounded by howling wolves and saved only by their guns. One Idaho guide told his clients to “never leave the camp without a gun and a buddy,” because 24 wolves surrounded them. Val Geist, a retired professor of biology at the University of Calgary, told a Montana blog that when wolves “sit and stare at humans [it’s] a prelude to an eventual attack.” State Senator Joe Balyeat believes that if wolf populations continue to grow, “someone in Idaho or Montana will be killed or mauled by wolves within a year, and it may very well be a small child.”

The anti-wolf movement thinks wolves threaten civilization itself. Marbut sent me his 2003 essay, “Wolves Circling the Fire: Of Beasts and Tyrants.” Its first sentence reads: “There was a time in Man’s evolution when he huddled around the nighttime fire gazing outward at the glowing ring of eyes – the predators who viewed man only as food.” A few good wolves “came in and joined Man at the fire and became dogs.” The rest stayed outside, always ready to attack. According to Marbut, “one might reasonably view Man’s entire development and creation of civilization as a process of fortifying against wolves.”

These claims resonate with many people because they build on a long tradition in western culture of demonizing the wolf. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church ruled that wolves belonged to the devil: Demons could take the shape of wolves, as could witches. Puritans then brought these ideas to America. Minister Cotton Mather called New England before settlement a “howling wilderness.” Asked to investigate Salem’s alleged witch infestation, Mather concluded in his book, *On
Witchcraft, that “Evening Wolves” (werewolves and witches) were but another of the Devil’s tests as New England passed from “Wilderness” to the “Promised Land.”

These sentiments remain alive in the Rocky Mountains today. Jim Boedner, director of natural resources for the Montana Livestock Growers Association, told me that wolves kill cattle, make them sick from “stress,” and scare elk herds down from the mountains onto grazing fields, where they compete with cows for forage. State Senator Balyeat – who wore a turquoise shirt with images of rust-colored elk the day I interviewed him in his capitol office – keeps a computer file full of photos of deer and elk calf remains. “The key thing that animal lovers don’t understand about wolves is that there’s a difference between wolves and other predators,” he said. “Wolves, grizzlies, and mountain lions are all killing machines, but wolves, in distinction, are also a breeding machine. I am an award-winning CPA, but it doesn’t take a CPA to do the math.” By Balyeat’s calculations, wolves have a 30 percent annual reproduction rate. If there are 550 wolves in Montana, and each wolf eats 46 elk a year, in ten years 5,830 wolves will eat 258,180 elk. “That’s more elk than we have in the entire state of Montana!” Balyeat says.

While arguing the specifics of wolf behavior, the anti-wolf movement unites segments of the political right by emphasizing wolves’ connection to a shared enemy: the federal government. Starting in the 1970s, ranchers in the self-described “Sagebrush Rebellion” claimed that because the National Forest Service had given them permits to graze livestock on public lands, that land had in essence become their private property. Therefore the imposition of environmental laws violated their rights. Some, like Wayne Hage, founder of the private property rights group American Stewards, go even farther. They say that the federal government should have sold its holdings in the West to ranchers in the late nineteenth century, but instead appropriated them. Like this “taking” of land to create national parks and forests, reintroducing wolves that then kill livestock – ranchers’ private property – represents another act of government domination.

According to Jim Beers, the wolf reintroduction in the mid-1990s was the result of federal government crime: The Clinton administration had illegally taken $60 million that hunters and fishers had paid in excise taxes on guns and gear and used it to pay for wolf reintroduction. Beers told this story repeatedly to hunting groups; it still circulates widely on anti-wolf websites.

To Gary Marbut, wolf depredation represents a “theft” from hunters. He told me that Montana’s game herds were “a savings account we were building up for our children and grandchildren. The wolf advocates elected to raid that savings account to feed their pet critters.”

Suzy Foss, a rancher in the Bitterroot Valley and a county commissioner, said that wolves are now in Montana because “monkeys in some government agency in a Washington high-rise think they’re good for us. They will destroy our society.”

“Not one wolf from Canada volunteered to come down here – they were drugged,” she told me. She said that many Bitterroot Valley residents had told her that elk stayed out of the woods because “they’re terrorized,” that their livestock had been
killed, and that they themselves had been “stalked or circled by wolves.” This, she said, is the reason why many people in the area carry guns.

The anti-wolf activists speak passionately, sometimes even persuasively, about their cause. But none of their claims are true.

Ed Bangs, director of wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, rejects the idea that Canadian and Rocky Mountain wolves are two different subspecies. “Once there were contiguous wolf packs from what is now Mexico City to the Arctic Ocean,” Bangs told me. They interbred and formed one species. Yes, the wolves in southern Canada ran a bit larger. But that’s because of what biologists call ‘Allen’s Rule’ – “as you move north, body size gets larger to preserve heat.” Hunters did not kill any “giant” wolves in the 2009 wolf hunts; of 188 killed in Idaho, the largest weighed 127 pounds, the average less than 95. What about those huge wolves shown on Lobowatch? They’re actually Arctic wolves, which don’t live in the Rockies. And while many wolves do carry tapeworms, scientists from the US Geological Survey Wildlife Health Center report that, “We know of no known transmission of *E. granulosus* from a wolf to a human.”

Neither is it true that wolf packs are lying in wait for the region’s school children. In the entire twentieth century, wolves attacked about 15 people in North America, killing none. (In 2010, wolves did kill a woman jogging on the outskirts of her Alaskan town.) In contrast, domestic dogs bite about one million people a year and cause about 18 deaths, mostly of children.

I asked wolf biologist Jay Mallone of Kalispell, Montana about the hunters’ stories of circling wolves ready for attack. He sounded jealous, and said: “For periods of time, all of us wolf biologists have lived among the wolves we studied and never been approached. I wish they would. It would make studying wild wolves a lot easier!”

Also: Wolves aren’t killing all of the West’s big game. Even the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a critic of wolf reintroduction, reports that from 1984 to 2009, the number of elk in Idaho went up 5 percent, in Wyoming 35 percent, and in Montana 66 percent. True, some local declines have occurred, and sometimes wolf depredation is a factor. In 1995, when wolves were first introduced in Yellowstone, there were 16,702 elk in the park. By December 2010, only 4,635 remained. But the cause of this decline is under debate.

Some studies point to bear predation, others to hunters (who are allowed to kill elk that have moved beyond the park), and still others to climate change – increased summer temperatures reduce nutrition, making elk more vulnerable.

It’s equally false to say that wolves are “breeding machines.” Predator populations change when numbers of prey decrease; climate and habitat conditions also influence reproductive rates. And while wolves do sometimes kill cattle and sheep, the numbers are surprisingly small. Federal statistics report that of Montana’s roughly 2.5 million head of cattle, wolves killed 97 in 2009 and 87 in 2010. Wolves killed
202 of Montana’s 250,000 sheep in 2009 and 64 in 2010. Suzy Foss’s county lost one cow to wolves in 2009 and two in 2010.

Carter Niemeyer, who worked for Wildlife Services in Montana from 1973 to 2000 and investigated more than 100 cases of reported wolf depredation, says he believes that only about 5 percent were verified kills. Pressure on investigators from ranchers and state officials corrupted the system, he writes in his book, *Wolfer: A Memoir*:

“Everyone’s kids go to the same schools; everyone shops in the same grocery store. If a rancher thinks a wolf killed his cow, the investigator isn’t going to argue with him.” Niemeyer told me he thinks the system perpetuates wolf killing. “We have a tremendous amount of livestock loss reported, but very little documentation to prove it. These claims become statistics and statistics drive the urge for predator control.”

Ranchers’ most ambitious claims – that because they hold grazing permits on federal lands that these lands are their private property – are also specious, dismissed by the United States Supreme Court in 2000. “In Public Land Council v. Babbitt the justices voted nine-to-zero that grazing permits are a license, not a property right,” said John Marvel, executive director of the Western Watersheds Project. In fact, the cattle industry is a major recipient of the very type of government largesse that the right often decries as welfare. The federal government charges ranchers $1.35 a month for a cow and calf to graze, when it costs the US Forest Service at least $12.25 per head to maintain mountain rangeland. “The low fee,” Marvel said, allows “ranchers to be compensated for risks of grazing on public lands, which includes risk of depredation.” Similarly, there is no legal basis to the idea that individual hunters “own” deer and elk as their “savings account” because they pay taxes on guns. As Marvel put it: “Groups like American Stewards and people like Suzy Foss are living in a fantasy world.”

The fantastic claims made by the right wing did not go unchecked. Between 2009 and 2010, the major national environmental groups focused on their lawsuit against the USFWS’s partial delisting. Mike Leahy, regional director for Defenders of Wildlife, told me that his group decided that the most important fight was “at the national level.” Meanwhile, a loose confederation of local wilderness activists tried to counter the anti-wolf propaganda by showing up at public hearings in Idaho and Montana and offering a defense of the wolf’s place in the Rocky Mountains.

Most the wolf supporters were relative newcomers to the area. They were middle-aged boomers who had moved to Montana and Idaho to live near wild and beautiful lands. Many of them identified as conservationists: They had read the classic environmental books on the interconnected web of life, they knew about the Native American spiritualism that understands animals as symbolic kin. They included Nabeki, a California transplant who became involved in protecting roadless areas and limiting off-road vehicles. Jerry Black was another one, a retired pilot and long-time wetlands activist from Washington who thought he would just fish and hike when he moved to Missoula to be near his children. But the anti-wolf movement repulsed him. “It’s as if wolf advocates are two-legged wolves,” Black explained, “and wolves represent four-legged environmentalists.” Marc Cooke moved from the East Coast to pursue wildlife photography, only to find the wildlife under siege. In Idaho, Ann
Sydow and Nancy Taylor, co-chairs of the Northern Idaho Wolf Alliance, shared a common interest in showing real (albeit captive) wolves to people – “wolf ambassadors” is what they call them – and could not stomach the attacks on the animals. Lynne Stone, an Idaho settler from Washington, had helped form the Boulder White Clouds Council, which tried to stop mines from dumping cyanide and mercury into Idaho’s rivers. That work led her to becoming a wolf advocate.

Between 2008 and 2010 this collection of part-time activists did whatever they thought would work to resist the wolf hunts. Jerry Black wrote federal agencies to try to find out why wolves killed by Wildlife Services were photographed with school children. Lynne Stone tried to scare wolves away from livestock with blank shotgun shells. Marc Cooke showed up at state hearings to argue for minimizing the number of wolves allowed to be killed. Nabeki started her Howling for Justice website and a Facebook affiliate, Wolf Warriors.

These ad-hoc efforts were not what you would call a powerful movement. But the fact that anyone would stand up for wolves enraged the wolf hunters. The fury the anti-wolf movement had directed toward animals was extended to humans.

As Gary Marbut told me: Just as wolves prey on animals, wolf advocates prey on society. “They are feasting on our savings account, our culture, our way of life, in order to impose their own culture of wolves.” They, too, were foreigners, people who “grew up in cities.” Anti-wolf bloggers have called the wolf defenders “pieces of communist crap” who “DO NOT belong in my country, who should be deported … and that’s my second choice of things to do with you.”

Between 2009 and 2011 the viciousness escalated. Lynne Stone received an e-mail photo of a dead wolf pup lying in the back of a pickup on December 24; the accompanying text read, “MERRY CHRISTMAS.” Soon the threats extended to the activists themselves. Ann Sydow opened her local paper to find a letter to the editor recommending that she “go for a walk in the woods and not come back.” Just showing up to a public meeting became dangerous, Marc Cooke explained. “When I go, they stare at me,” he said. “Half of them have pistols at their sides. They say ‘Marc, we know who you are. We know where you live.’”

The intimidation worked. Afraid for their lives and their families, regional wolf advocates stopped participating in public hearings held by fish and game agencies and legislative committees and retreated to the relative safety of the Internet to spread their message. In theory, government officials are supposed to run public meetings in an inclusive manner that, in the words of Montana administrative rules, promote “social tolerance.” But in the experience of Travis McAdam, executive director of the Montana Human Rights Network, “Public officials never get up and remove the people who scream at meetings. The same ones who are doing cat calls are carrying guns, and they’re making democracy fail.” Soon, the voices of the wolf haters became the only ones heard in the policy making process.

With few, if any, local constituents speaking up on behalf of the wolves, the political calculus for Montana and Idaho politicians was easy. Office holders across the political spectrum raced to denounce wolves. Montana’s sole congressman,
Republican Danny Rehberg, repeatedly spoke against wolf reintroduction and federal protection. After Judge Molloy’s August 2010 decision relisting wolves under the Endangered Species Act, Rehberg introduced a bill in the House of Representatives to remove this protection – in essence, a Congressional nullification of the ESA. Montana’s Democratic Senators Jon Tester (who faces opposition from Rehberg in the 2012 election) and Max Baucus then introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

In October 2010, Idaho’s Republican governor, Butch Otter, ordered state wildlife managers to “relinquish their duty to arrest poachers.” Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer, a Democrat, announced that Montanans could open fire on wolves in the northern part of the state if they felt their livestock were endangered. And in February 2011, Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson and Senator Tester placed into the federal budget bill a rider delisting wolves.

Having successfully captured both Republicans and Democrats in the region, the far-right-wing offensive then shattered the environmental movement’s will. Worried that Congress would pass one of the bills and set a dangerous precedent allowing political intervention against any species listed as endangered, all of the national groups that had filed suit to protect the Rockies’ wolves (with the exception of the Humane Society of the United States) announced they had reached a settlement with the Department of the Interior (which oversees the USFWS). The agreement basically reversed the environmentalists’ 2010 legal victory putting wolves back on the list of endangered species.

Besides the Humane Society, three regional groups declined to settle. John Marvel, executive director of the Western Watersheds Project, explained why his group refused to go along with the deal: “Our board of directors came to the conclusion that the outlook for wolves from this settlement or from Congressional delisting was the same and it was inappropriate for us to assist in this outcome.” That analysis quickly proved prescient. Neither John Tester nor Danny Rehberg nor Mike Simpson withdrew their bills. Then, on April 9, Judge Donald Molloy rejected the proposed agreement, and kept Montana and Idaho wolves on the endangered species list. Almost immediately, Congress rendered his ruling irrelevant by passing the budget with the anti-wolf rider included. The rider will also remove from the endangered species list some wolf populations in Washington, Oregon, and Utah.

The far right’s campaign to scapegoat wolves thus succeeded. Although the courts were prepared to uphold the Endangered Species Act, the anti-wolf voices dominated the political contest. The national organizations had lost track of the basic reality of politics – namely, that all politics are local – and instead concentrated solely on legal maneuvering and online petitions. Local wolf defenders were essentially abandoned; outnumbered, it was no surprise that they should lose. Fear of wolves – and hatred of what they symbolized – spread from the far right, to the Republican Party, to the Democrats. And then that fear, or some form of it, was internalized by the mainstream environmental movement. Afraid of witnessing an even broader weakening of the ESA, environmental groups decided to sacrifice wolves, calculating that doing so might save other species covered by the act.
Wolf blood will flow across the Rocky Mountains this fall and winter. For the right, that blood will represent an impressive victory. For wolf advocates, it means grief. Their only hope lies in the belief that the killing might backfire, creating a national sense of shame. Nabeki, for one, thinks the war is not over. “The delisting has galvanized the grassroots movement,” she said. “People are so outraged about this. They’re becoming more bold.”

And there is hope in the wolves themselves. When I visited Montana, activists from both sides whispered to me, as if sharing a secret, “You know, wolves are really smart.” Perhaps their intelligence will enable them to survive. They will climb higher into the mountains, move about only at night, and hide, somewhere, until times change.

Read James William Gibson’s writings at jameswilliamgibson.com. Marc Cooke helped arrange interviews with wolf hunters and advocates for this story.


June 24, 2011

The Spice-Box of Earth: Remembering Where We Come From

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Huffington Post

The poet Leonard Cohen once wrote:

Out of the Land of Heaven
Down comes the warm Sabbath sun
Into the spice-box of earth.

This poem was written in homage to the painter Marc Chagall and seems to be a verbal invocation of one of Chagall's painting. The rabbi thrusts his hands into the "spice-box of earth, finds the sun and makes it a wedding ring for the Sabbath Queen.

In using the phrase "the spice-box of earth" Cohen was using the image of the spice-box from the Jewish Havdalah ceremony, which is performed each Saturday night to mark the end of the Sabbath. In that ceremony, three ritual items are used: a cup of wine, an ornamental box filled with spices, like cloves, and a candle made from at least three twisted strands.

Havdalah (Hebrew meaning "division") begins 40 minutes after sunset with the recitation of biblical verses. These verses all have references to redemption since the Sabbath day is
considered a taste of the Messianic era. As such, there is always the hope that the final redemption has come before the end of the day and the Sabbath will continue forever. Havdalah marks what is called a "liminal moment," a boundary between the sacredness of the Sabbath and the ordinary days of the week. In most religious communities crossing liminal boundaries is accompanied by rituals. Havdalah is one such ritual in Judaism.

Then there is a blessing over the wine. From ancient times, wine has marked sacred time. We then bless the spices and smell them. It is an ancient belief that on the Sabbath we receive an extra soul that is now leaving us and we need the smell of the spices to revive us from this loss. We then bless the candle and we hold up our hands to see the shadows which remind us of the division of light and darkness. Finally we conclude with a blessing that blesses God for the divisions between day and night, light and darkness, Sabbath and the rest of the week, the Jewish people and the other people of the world. It is a ceremony of great beauty that brings to mind not only the other times when we performed Havdalah and the people we shared it with but also the ancient stories of Creation and Redemption.

The Jewish tradition is filled with blessings for such moments but also for many experiences of life or encounters in the natural world. There are blessings for eating bread and fruit; blessings for drinking water and wine; blessings for seeing the sea or a rainbow or seeing the first blossoms of spring. These are sacred pauses that are meant to open our ideas to wonder of all existence. The late scholar Max Kadushin called the theology behind the blessings "normal mysticism" by which he meant that they are designed to bring us to an immediate experience of God in Creation through everyday experiences. What seems to be mundane becomes holy in our eyes.

When I came upon Cohen's poem some years ago, the image of the spice-box of earth reminded me not only of Havdalah but also the fragrances of the natural world: grass, trees and flowers. Often, such fragrances evoke memories of when we first smelled those scents. For me, the smell of the trees on a warm summer night brings back very specific memories of teenage experiences many years ago. Walking in a forest after a rain makes me think of canoe trips in Algonquin Park in northern Ontario.

But what if from time to time we plunged our hands directly into the earth? We would then smell the deep aromas from the earth itself: the heady and unadorned smell of decomposition, worms and leaves. We would open up our senses to the kind of smells we usually seek to cover up with human-made perfumes. The spice-box of the earth changes every moment and is constantly filled with a complex diversity of elements. Every time and everywhere you smell it, it will be different. And in a very real way the sun is within the spice-box of the earth since all life processes comes from the initial energy of the sun.

It has been shown scientifically that our sense of smell is a powerful memory trigger and certain scents evoke very clearly scenes from our early life. The parts of our brain that process smells are contained within the sections of our brain that are the sources of our emotions and where emotional memories are stored. So scents, emotions and memories are entwined. Our sense of smell also works much more quickly than our other senses in sending its messages to be processed.
That is why smells have such an immediate and potent effect on us. Deep in each of us are memories of how we connect with the earth, how we are of the earth and how we will go back to the earth. These are the memories that we have suppressed or covered over with artificial perfumes.

Maybe we need to create a new ritual to regularize this experience. I believe that we need to find a liminal moment at least once a week where after days spent feeling disconnected to the earth, we reconnect with the spice box of earth by plunging our hands into the earth, the source of our selves. In order to reconnect with Creation it is time to smell and feel once again the spice-box of earth to revive our souls.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Creator of all kinds of spices.


June 27, 2011

Three Media Views of Green Living

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

It is ironic that green ways of living that emphasize voluntary simplicity -- a life-way that can take us into an opportunity-filled future -- are often portrayed in the mass media as regressive ways of life that turn away from progress. Here are three portrayals of green lifestyles and simplicity common in today's popular media:

1. Crude or Regressive Simplicity. The mainstream media often shows simplicity as a path of regress instead of progress. Simplicity is frequently presented as anti-technology and anti-innovation, a backward-looking way of life that seeks a romantic return to a bygone era. Profiles often depict a utopian, back-to-nature movement with families leaving the stresses of an urban life in favor of living in the woods, or on a farm, or in a recreational vehicle, or on a boat. Often it is a stereotypical view of a crudely simple lifestyle -- a throwback to an earlier time and more primitive condition -- with no indoor toilet, no phone, no computer, no television, and no car. No thanks! Seen in this way, simplicity is a cartoon lifestyle that seems naive, disconnected, and irrelevant -- an approach to living that can be easily dismissed as impractical and unworkable. Regarding simplicity as regressive and primitive makes it easier to embrace a "business as usual" approach to living in the world.

2. Cosmetic or Superficial Simplicity. In recent years, a different view of simplicity has begun to appear: a cosmetic simplicity that attempts to cover over deep defects in our modern ways of living by giving the appearance of meaningful change. Shallow simplicity assumes that green
technologies -- such as fuel-efficient cars, fluorescent light bulbs, and recycling -- will fix our problems, give us breathing room, and allow us to continue pretty much as we have in the past without requiring that we make fundamental changes in how we live and work. Cosmetic simplicity puts green lipstick on our unsustainable lives to give them the outward appearance of health and happiness. A superficial simplicity gives a false sense of security by implying that small measures will solve great difficulties. A cosmetic simplicity perpetuates the status quo by assuming that, with use of green technologies we can moderate our impact and continue along our current path of growth for another half century or more.

3. Deep or Conscious Simplicity. Occasionally presented in the mass media and poorly understood by the general public is a conscious simplicity that represents a deep, graceful, and sophisticated transformation in our ways of living -- the work that we do, the transportation that we use, the homes and neighborhoods in which we live, the food that we eat, the clothes that we wear, and much more. A sophisticated and graceful simplicity seeks to heal our relationship with the earth, with one another, and with the sacred universe. Conscious simplicity is not simple. This life way is growing and flowering with a garden of expressions. Deep simplicity fits aesthetically and sustainably into the real world of the 21st century.

Few people would voluntarily go through the difficulty of fundamentally restructuring their manner of living and working if they thought they could tighten their belts and wait for things to return to "normal." A majority of people will shift their ways of living only when it is unmistakably clear that we must make dramatic and lasting changes. Has the world reached a point of no return and crossed a threshold where a shift toward the simple prosperity of green lifestyles is the new "normal"?


July 3, 2011

Can Death Become Your Ally?

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

Death is an important ally for appreciating life. I am not referring to a morbid preoccupation with death. Rather, I mean the felt awareness of our finitude as physical beings -- an honest recognition of the short time we have to love and to learn on this earth. The knowledge that our bodies will inevitably die burns through our attachments to the dignified madness of our socially constructed existence. Death is a friend that helps us to release our clinging to social position and material possessions as a source of ultimate security and identity. An awareness of death forces us to confront the purpose and meaning of our existence, here and now.

Those who have had near-death experiences confirm that awareness of death can be an uncompromising friend, putting us back in touch with what is most important. A common
sentiment expressed by many near-death survivors is a decreased emphasis on money and material things and a heightened appreciation for nature and loving other people. Dr. Kenneth Ring, a researcher of near-death experiences, quotes a young man who had a near-death experience after a serious automobile accident. As a result the young man found that he developed an "awareness that something more was going on in life than just the physical part of it... It was just a total awareness of not just the material and how much we can buy -- in the way of cars and stuff, or food or anything. There's more than just consuming life. There's a point where you have to give to it and that's real important."

Gandhi once said, "Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence." If we are to lead nonviolent and loving lives, then we can begin by coming to terms with our own death. An appreciation that we must die awakens us from our social sleep and to the reality of our situation. Death is an unyielding partner in life -- an inescapable certainty to push against as we sort out the significant from the trivial in our daily lives. In this regard, consider the words of Nadine Stair of Louisville, Kentucky, who was 85-years-old when she wrote, "If I Had My Life to Live Over":

I'd like to make more mistakes next time. I'd relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones. . . . I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had to do it again, I would travel lighter than I have.

Finally, consider the wisdom from a now largely forgotten book, written in the United States in 1877. In its closing pages "The Royal Path of Life" describes a perspective on life that comes from an appreciation of death. Although written in a style of gracious eloquence that comes from an earlier era, it speaks plainly even today:

No sex is spared, no age exempt. The majestic and courtly roads which monarchs pass over, the way that the men of letters tread, the path the warrior traverses, the short and simple annals of the poor, all lead to the same place, all terminate, however varied their routes, in that one enormous house which is appointed for all living. . . . No matter what station of honor we hold, we are all subject to death. . . . A proper view of death may be useful to abate most of the irregular passions. Thus, for instance, we may see what avarice comes to in the coffin of the miser; this is the man who could never be satisfied with riches; but see now a few boards enclose him, and a few square inches contain him. . . Behold the consequences of intemperance in the tomb of the glutton; see his appetite now fully satiated, his senses destroyed and his bones scattered.

These messages are clear. We cannot hide from death. Its embrace will consume our social existence entirely. Job titles, social position, material possessions, sexual roles and images--all must yield to death. This does not mean that we should abandon our material and social existence. Rather, it means that in consciously honoring the fact of our physical death, we are thereby empowered to penetrate through the social pretense, ostentation, and confusion that normally obscure our sense of what is truly significant. An awareness of death is an ally for infusing our lives with a sense of immediacy, perspective, and proportion. In acknowledging the reality of death, we can more fully appreciate our gift of life.
If you were to choose death as an ally (as a reminder of the preciousness of each moment), and if you were to choose the universe as your home (as a reminder of the awesome dimensions of our existence), would a quality of aliveness, immediacy, and poignancy naturally infuse your moment-to-moment living? If you knew that you would die within several hours or days, would the simplest things acquire a luminous and penetrating significance? Would each moment become precious beyond all previous measure? Would each flower, each person, each crack in the sidewalk, each tree become a fleeting and never-to-be-repeated miracle? Simplicity of living helps brings this kind of clarity and appreciation into our lives. In what ways is an appreciation of death a helpful partner in your own life?


July 5, 2011

Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL) endorses Holy Land Declaration on Climate Change

Press Release

JERUSALEM – The Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land is pleased to announce its endorsement of the Holy Land Declaration on Climate Change, which was submitted to the CRIHL by the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development.

Holy Land Declaration on Climate Change

The Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL), representing the high representatives of Israeli and Palestinian religious authorities, recognizes the challenge global climate change poses and the imperative for action. We acknowledge the scientific basis of human-caused climate change and the threat it poses to human societies and the planet, as articulated by the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We also recognize the spiritual roots of this crisis, and the importance of a religious response to it.

We call on adherents of our faiths in the Holy Land and all over the world to address this crisis by undertaking a deep reassessment of our spiritual and physical relationship to this God-given planet and how we consume, use and dispose of its blessed resources. We also call for all people of faith to reduce their personal emissions of greenhouse-gases and to urge their political leaders to adopt strong, binding, science-based targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases in order to avert the worst dangers of climate crisis.

We hope that this threat to our common home of the Holy Land and of Planet Earth will move religious adherents to overcome inter-religious strife and work together for ours and our children’s common well-being.

http://www.crihl.org/content/5-jul-2011-crihl-Endorses-Holy-Land-Declaration-Climate-Change
July 8, 2011

“Protecting Mother Earth Gathering” to be held on oil and gas ravaged Indian land

Press Release

NEW TOWN, North Dakota -- Community members of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation are hosting the 16th Protecting Mother Earth Gathering at the Little Shell Antelope Society arbor in the Four Bears Park campground, south of the 4 Bears Casino, from July 28-31, 2011. The Four Bears Park is situated 4 miles west of New Town, North Dakota.

The Indigenous Environmental Network, a Native national environmental justice advocacy organization, is sponsoring the gathering where educators, indigenous peoples, local community members, youth and elders, and other interested individuals camp outdoors together for four days to collectively discourse and strategize on the resolution of local, national, and international environmental justice and indigenous rights issues through forums of plenary and concurrent workshop sessions.

Informational sessions, demonstration projects, and skills trainings related to protecting the Mother Earth will be offered daily by renowned Native traditional leaders, Native activists, advocates, educators, and practitioners of environmentally conscious living. An on-site kitchen staffed by volunteers will provide three free meals a day and an afternoon snack. Free daycare is also available for children, ages 4—11 (diaper-free). Donations during registration are very much appreciated but are not required. Tribal programs and environmental organizations with budgets are welcomed to donate. Evening sessions begin at 8pm and include A Cultural/Traditional games and activities night Thursday in the MHA Nations Earth Lodge Village, an Open Mic/Talent Show on Friday night and a Traditional Pow Wow on Saturday night. In addition, there will be a water ceremony on Saturday morning beginning at 5:45am led by Mother Earth Water Walker & Anishinawbe Grandmother Josephine Mandamin. Participants are asked to bring a small amount of water from their homelands to take part in the water ceremony and all women are asked to wear skirts if planning to attend.

Participants may sign up for the walk/run on Saturday morning beginning at 7am as well as area tours of the Three Affiliated Tribes Museum, Earth Lodge Village &; Straw Bale Building Demonstration home at the local Fort Berthold Community College. Two Continuing Education Units from FBCC will be available to registrants.

The theme for the July gathering is “Water, Energy, Climate, and the Importance of Health and Culture,” which is fitting for the indigenous community hosting PME. The MHA homelands are currently in the midst of a gigantic oil boom on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. Tribal members are experiencing social, economic, environmental, and cultural changes for which they were wholly unprepared. A greatly increased industry-related population has resulted in a town full of strangers competing for the same jobs and resources as the local people. Long convoys of huge industrial vehicles roar through the towns and countryside tearing up roads that weren’t
built for behemoth trucks. Deteriorated highways--two of which are main roadways through the reservation--have been sitting closed, causing some tribal members long daily detours to work.

Oil removal methods, well blow-outs, toxic spills, illegal dumping and increased gas emissions have tribal members concerned about their land, air, water and health.

The Protecting Mother Earth Gathering will provide a forum for the local community and visitors to discuss their specific and mutual concerns, to gain an understanding of IEN’s work, and to seek viable methods for protecting the environment. Individuals interested in the gathering may visit IEN’s website at www.ienearth.org for more information and to register.

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July 9, 2011

Fracking In Marcellus Shale Region Debated By Bishops, Nuns And Rabbis

By Kevin Begos
Huffington Post

PITTSBURGH -- Bishops, nuns and rabbis are joining the environmental and social debate over natural gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale region, and many are seeking a balance that reflects their congregations.

"We have people's lives who are being blessed or adversely affected by this," said Bishop Thomas Bickerton of Pittsburgh, who leads more than 800 United Methodist congregations and 187,000 members in western Pennsylvania, where major drilling is taking place.

"The conversations within the church are rather lively and robust," Bickerton said, and he thinks gas drilling "warrants some careful looking" by religious groups and public officials.

Bickerton told The Associated Press that it's a delicate topic. On one hand, he's very supportive of the economic development which gas drilling has spurred across the region. On the other, he said it appears the state has not thoroughly looked at all the issues around drilling, its impact on communities and the environment.

And as a West Virginia native, he's seen how mining for another natural resource – coal – has helped and hurt communities.
Energy companies have identified major reserves of natural gas throughout the Marcellus Shale, a shale formation that underlies much of New York and Pennsylvania, and parts of Maryland, Ohio and West Virginia.

More than 3,300 wells have been drilled across Pennsylvania in just the last few years. The boom has raised concerns about the use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, which injects chemical-laced water to break up the shale and allow natural gas to escape into the shale to push out the minerals. Environmental groups and the Environmental Protection Agency have expressed concerns about how the process impacts water, soil and air quality. But the industry insists it is safe.

Bickerton is one of several religious and community leaders who last month signed a protest letter to U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu. The letter, which originated with the Environmental Working Group of Washington, D.C., questioned the makeup of a federal committee that is reviewing fracking impacts, and asked for more community involvement in the review process.

Bickerton's western Pennsylvania United Methodist Conference is one of many groups that have used church publications to examine the benefits and pitfalls of fracking. An article titled "The Morality of Fracking" appeared in The National Catholic Reporter last month, and the Reform Jewish Voice of New York State endorsed the drilling moratorium there.

Scientific and environmental issues aren't the only concern.

"I believe personally that the church does have responsibility to engage the wider body of the community about what's moral and what's not. What's ethical and what's not," said Bickerton. He said he doesn't want to inhibit economic growth, yet is concerned that some in his congregation have been taken advantage of, such as with contracts they don't understand or side effects they haven't considered.

Norman Wirzba, a professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina, said he thinks it's noteworthy that Bickerton, the leader of a large congregation, is speaking out.

"There is a history within American Christianity with just being concerned with getting the soul to heaven," Wirzba said. Religious environmental activism dates back to the 1950s and 60s, but it often presents great challenges at the local level. If a religious group seeks to change the whole economic system, then the very livelihood of the people they serve can be put into jeopardy, he said.

"What you really need is a kind of activism that can speak out against injustices, but also propose alternatives," Wirzba said. "The last thing we need is well-meaning environmentalists running around the world telling people how to live."

Fracking is one of many environmental issues that religious groups have debated in recent years. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment includes perspectives from Evangelical, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Interfaith groups. In April, the Kentucky group Blessed Earth
used the slogan "Make Earth Day a Church Day" and a "Green Bible" was recently published, with essays and "passages that speak to God's care for creation highlighted in green."

In some cases, religious groups see gas drilling as a way to support charitable work.

Kathryn Klaber, president of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, a drilling industry group, said she was surprised last year to find that dozens of religious groups had entered into gas drilling leases.

"That to me was real eye-opener, when you're literally funding mission through the leasing of mineral rights," said Klaber, who believes religious groups can help in the process of distributing some of the newfound wealth that gas drilling is generating.

One example is Camp Agape, a bible camp set on 257 acres in Hickory, Pa., about 25 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. It was founded 50 years ago, and is owned and operated by an association made up of 17 congregations from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

About four years ago the camp decided to lease drilling rights to Range Resources, said Charles Wingert, a member of the all-volunteer board of directors.

"It's been a good experience for us. Not without some worry and trepidation," Wingert said. "Basically we were living on a shoestring for many, many years."

The camp, which serves about 150 children each summer, runs a program that provides intensive tutoring for kids who are struggling with reading and math.

"We're really enthused that we're able to help children, and we couldn't do this without the additional income," Wingert said. The lease payments have also helped in upgrading the camp and keeping fees low, and may ultimately provide for an endowment. They've also helped the camp survive.

"I think we would not be here without the income," said Wingert, who added that board members felt that the gas below the camp is part of God's creation, just like forests and streams.

Some religious groups think another way to address the fracking issue is to start at the top, by engaging and pressuring large corporations.

Sister Nora Nash is director of the corporate social responsibility program at the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, which was founded more than 150 years ago. The order began caring for smallpox patients in 1858 and opened St. Mary's Hospital for the poor in 1860.

The group has a long history of asking the corporations in which the sisters invest to be more socially conscious. Nash visited western Pa. last year to talk to people in communities where fracking was taking place, and was disturbed by what she saw. Her group also signed the protest letter to the Secretary of Energy.

"All of the poorest of the poor are not getting the jobs. Everyplace we looked there was a white truck from Oklahoma or Texas," she said.
Earlier this year the Sisters of St. Francis joined with other religious groups to file a formal
shareholder proposal with energy giant Chevron, which has purchased large holdings in the
Marcellus region.

The proposal asked Chevron to look at ways to go "above and beyond regulatory requirements"
and reduce or eliminate hazards to air, water and soil quality from fracking. Several related
proposals were put before energy companies, and Nash was encouraged by the response. On
average, the shareholder proposals seeking greater transparency on fracking got 30 percent of the
vote, and in one case, 42 percent.

Chevron's board responded to the shareholder fracking proposal by noting that the company "is
already committed to meeting or exceeding all applicable laws and regulations," and that the new
suggestions "would merely duplicate Chevron's current efforts and thus would be a waste of
stockholder money."

But over time it is possible to influence corporations, Nash said.

"We are active in shareholder advocacy. We've been working with Chevron for about 10 years.
And last year Chevron did sign a human rights policy. And we felt really good about that," Nash
said.

"I think their intentions are good," Nash said of Chevron. "But they have a long way to go to
look at the significant risks to human health" that fracking may pose.

Wirzba said the North Carolina Council of Churches is working on a statement, and Rabbi
Arthur Waskow of Philadelphia's Shalom Center has written articles critical of fracking.

Sybil Sanchez, director of the New York-based Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life, said
her group supports increasing energy independence in ways that also protect the environment,
which they see as God's Creation. But fracking is of particular concern because of the number of
unknown chemicals used and the impact it has on local citizens and their access to clean water,
Sanchez said.

Ultimately, Wirzba said that if religious groups want to change how natural gas drilling interacts
with communities, words aren't enough.

"You're not going to change the lives of people really, unless you live with them," he said. "That
means you can't do it just by holding a poster. You gotta do it by moving into a neighborhood."


July 13, 2011
Fracking Comes to Jewish Summer Camp

Concern Over the Environment Versus Financial Reward

By Josh Nathan-Kazis
Forward

Fracking, the controversial technique for extracting natural gas that energy companies are promoting as America’s path to energy independence, has come to the sunny, idyllic world of Jewish camping.

Four Jewish summer camps have signed leases with gas exploration companies which could allow the deep bore drilling technique — criticized by many experts as damaging to the environment — at their campgrounds by this fall.

Although the leases were signed in 2008 and 2009, an interstate regulatory body has put a hold on natural gas drilling in Wayne County, Pa., where the four camps are located. But that hold could be lifted in September.

The leases, all of which are held by the Hess Corporation, highlight tension between environmental concerns over the new drilling technique, which has drawn opposition from most Jewish environmental groups, and the significant paydays that gas companies can offer the not-for-profit camps.

“This thing is so much bigger than we are,” said Leonard Robinson, executive director of the New Jersey YMHA-YWHA Camps. His organization received $400,000 upon signing an oil and gas lease with Hess in 2009 on a property that houses two summer camps. “We realized this is way beyond us,” Robinson said.

Hydraulic fracturing, or hydrofracking, is a relatively new technology that allows extraction of natural gas from previously inaccessible formations of tightly packed shale. Drill crews sink wells deep into the ground and then drill horizontal bores thousands of feet across the rock. The crews blast high volumes of water mixed with sand and chemicals through the bores, breaking up rock formations and releasing natural gas.

The fracking of a single well creates more than 1 million gallons of wastewater awash in pollutants, including some radioactive materials. Environmentalists worry that this water could escape from the wells and taint nearby water supplies. According to a February report in The New York Times, state and federal documents show that the wastewater is sometimes hauled to sewage plants not designed to treat it and then discharged into rivers that supply drinking water.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has announced a study of the impact of hydrofracking on drinking water, to be completed by 2014.

In the meantime, the technology is already being used extensively in Texas, Arkansas and other states. The most promising target for hydrofracking in the Northeast is the Marcellus Shale, a massive geological formation covering parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West
Virginia. Though the technique is currently banned in New York, wells have been drilled in parts of Pennsylvania.

The Marcellus Shale sits beneath both New York’s Catskill Mountains and Pennsylvania’s Poconos, the dual epicenters of Jewish camping. During the summer, the two areas draw thousands of young Jews from throughout the Northeast to the tens of Jewish summer camps in each area, as well as many other children attending nonsectarian camps.

Of about 30 Jewish summer camps that sit above the Marcellus Shale, four told the Forward that they had begun negotiations with gas companies and never signed deals or, in one case, ignored a query from an interested firm.

Another four Pennsylvania camps told the Forward that they had signed deals with gas companies. Those are Starlight’s Perlman Camp, which is owned and operated by B’nai B’rith; Camps Nesher and Shoshanim, which share a property in Lakewood and are owned and operated by the New Jersey Federation of YMHA and YWHA, and Camp Morasha, an independent camp in Lakewood.

B’nai B’rith and the New Jersey Y camps signed leases with Hess in 2009, while Morasha signed a lease with Chesapeake Appalachia, L.L.C. in 2008. Chesapeake later transferred the Morasha lease to Hess.

The technology used in the wells could allow extraction of gas without any well pads being placed on the camp properties. But the drilling companies do have the right to drill wells at the camps — in some cases, during camping season.

The terms of the agreements with Hess included significant paydays for the camps. The B’nai B’rith Henry Monsky Foundation, the affiliate that owns and operates Perlman Camp, received an $115,248 bonus upon signing the deal in August 2009. Assuming that Hess chooses to allow the lease to run its full term, bonus payments to the organization by 2015 would total $1,005,648. The organization would also receive 20% of net profits on gas extracted from the site. The New Jersey Y camps, whose property is much larger than B’nai B’rith’s, would receive bonus payments totaling $3,486,372 by 2015, plus 20% of gas profits.

Morasha’s lease is less lucrative. The camp is entitled to only 15% of profits on gas extracted from its wells, and received only a one-time bonus payment upon signing. The size of that payment is not listed on lease documents filed with the county recorder of deeds.

It is difficult to estimate what the royalty payments will come to in dollar terms before the wells are drilled. But hydrofracking advocate Timothy Considine, a professor of energy economics at the University of Wyoming, said that if the wells in Wayne County prove as productive as those in neighboring Susquehanna, they could be exceedingly profitable. “The royalty incomes are very significant,” he said.

It remains to be seen how the not-for-profit camps will use these new revenues. Harrell Wittenstein, director of camping services for B’nai Brith, said he had not yet considered this issue.
No drilling activity has taken place yet at any of the camps. All are located within Wayne County, which saw intensive efforts by gas companies to secure leases beginning in 2007. Those efforts slowed dramatically in 2009, when an interstate agency called the Delaware River Basin Commission effectively blocked new hydrofracking wells in areas draining into the Delaware River as the commission considered new regulations.

In December, the DRBC issued a draft of those regulations, which must be approved by the agency’s commissioners — the governors of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and a representative of the federal government. A DRBC spokeswoman said that a vote would not come before September.

A spokeswoman for Hess said that it was too early to say how long it would take to begin drilling after the DRBC settles on its new regulations.

All three of the camp leases contain some provisions to mitigate environmental risks. The gas companies have promised the camps to repair or replace their water supplies if they become contaminated due to drilling, and the leases also force gas companies to select surfaces for drilling and construction in ways that minimize erosion.

The New Jersey Y and B’nai B’rith leases, whose terms are identical, are based on a mega-lease negotiated by a landowners group called the Northern Wayne Property Owners Association. Robinson said he chose to work with the owners group because of what he saw as its commitment to environmental safety.

Robinson said that many of the landowners working with the NWPOA were dairy farmers. “The dairy farmers are very concerned about every aspect of raising cows and getting proper milk out,” he said. “They had a lot of conditions put in that the gas companies did not want put in originally…. We felt that if we tried to negotiate our own deal at that point, we couldn’t get as many safeguards in.”

But while the NWPOA lease includes extensive sections spelling out gas company obligations to reclaim utilized land and barring the gas companies from injecting saltwater or wastewater into wells without permission, it fails to explicitly bar companies from drilling during camp season — a protection included in the Morasha lease.

Robinson said that Hess told him that they wouldn’t drill during the summer. “You think we want to be all over the press, here we’re coming in when kids are there?” Robinson recalled Hess representatives saying.

Wittenstein, the B’nai Brith camping services director, also said that the drilling would not interfere with camping. “The natural gas companies cannot and do not want to interfere with the current business operation on the property,” Wittenstein wrote in an e-mail. “The camp season, when children occupy the grounds, is 7 weeks and the camp operations only occupies 90 of the approximate 332 acres owned by the Henry Monsky Foundation. They want to place the well pads so that they create the least liability for the corporation and do not interfere with ongoing business.”
The New Jersey Y and B’nai B’rith leases bar drilling activity within 500 feet of existing structures and allow the camps some say over where the drill pads are placed. They also require that the gas company choose locations that do not “unreasonably interfere” with the camp’s use of the property. The Morasha lease keeps surface operations 1,000 feet from existing structures.

Hydrofracking in Pennsylvania has not been without recent incident. In April, 10,000 gallons of hydrofracking fluid spilled over a well’s containment berms in Bradford County. Some of the fluid made its way into a nearby stream.

In a telephone conversation with the Forward, Robinson defended his camp’s decision to sign a Hess lease, saying, among other things, that he felt he had no choice under Pennsylvania law. Gas companies, he claimed, could eventually force landowners to take payment for their resources if enough of their neighbors signed. But in fact, such laws don’t apply to Marcellus Shale wells, though they do affect other areas of the state.

Stephen Saunders, a Scranton, Pa.-based attorney who specializes in oil and gas law and in environmental law and represented B’nai B’rith during its negotiations with Hess, said that Robinson’s misconception was a common one. Some of the agents seeking leases on behalf of the gas companies, known as land men, were known to misrepresent the Pennsylvania law in order to convince landowners to sign, according to Saunders.

Activists say that the camps signed their leases before public furor over hydrofracking reached its current peak, and before information about the practice was widely available. “They probably didn’t understand what they were doing,” said Mirele Goldsmith, an environmental psychologist who last March wrote an opinion piece in the Forward that said some Jewish camps were being approached by gas companies and argued that the camps should not to accept the deals.

But in recent months, concerns over fracking have escalated. Reform Jewish Voice of New York State, a project of the Union for Reform Judaism, supports New York State’s current moratorium on the practice. (Gov. Cuomo has indicated that he will seek to lift the ban in parts of the state.) In a statement, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, a program of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, also expressed reservations about hydrofracking.

“COEJL supports increasing our energy independence in ways that also protect the environment,” wrote Sybil Sanchez, COEJL’s director, in an e-mail to the Forward. “Hydrofracking is of particular concern because of the number of unknown chemicals used, the impact it has on local residents and their access to clean water, and the overall destructive nature of the process.”

One activist said that the actions of the camps, and of the parent organizations that control them, is inherently political. “These companies are putting lots of money into lobbying,” said Rabbi Daniel J. Swartz, spiritual leader of Temple Hesed in Scranton and vice president of the Pennsylvania chapter of Interfaith Power and Light, an environmental organization. “You have to understand that once you sign, you’re contributing to those businesses, you’re contributing to those businesses and their profits and all the things that they’re standing for.”
B’nai Brith spokeswoman Sharon Bender said that her organization has no position on hydrofracking.

Robinson denied that signing the lease constituted a political act. “We don’t send lobbying letters, we don’t go to lobbying events, we don’t do anything to encourage it or not encourage it,” he said. “In the end, they’re going to do what they want to do.”

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http://forward.com/articles/139831/

July 13, 2011

How Spirituality Tells Us to Be Simple

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

The wisdom of simplicity is a theme with deep roots. The great value and benefits of living simply are found in all the world’s major wisdom traditions.

Christian Views

Jesus embodied a life of compassionate simplicity. He taught by word and example that we should not make the acquisition of material possessions our primary aim; instead, we should develop our capacity for loving participation in life. The Bible speaks frequently about the need to find a balance between the material and the spiritual side of life:

- "Give me neither poverty nor wealth." (Proverbs 30:8)
- "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth ... Store up treasure in heaven ... For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)
- "If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the divine love dwells in him?" (John 3:17)

Eastern Views

Eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism have also encouraged a life of material moderation and spiritual abundance. From the Taoist tradition we have this saying from Lao-tzu: "He who knows he has enough is rich."

From the Hindu tradition, Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual and political leader who was instrumental in gaining India’s independence, wrote: "Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment." Gandhi felt the moderation of our wants
increases our capacity to be of service to others and, in being of loving service to others, true civilization emerges. Also found in the Hindu tradition is the idea of "non-possessiveness," or taking only what we need and finding satisfaction in balanced living.

Perhaps the most developed expression of a middle way between material excess and deprivation comes from the Buddhist tradition. While Buddhism recognizes that basic material needs must be met in order to realize our potentials, it does not consider our material welfare as an end in itself; rather, it is a means to the end of awakening to our deeper nature as spiritual beings. The middle way of Buddhism moves between mindless materialism on the one hand and needless poverty on the other. The result is a balanced approach to living that harmonizes both inner and outer development.

**Greek Views**

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle recognized the importance of the "golden mean," or a middle path through life characterized by neither excess nor deficit, but by sufficiency. They did not view the material world as primary but as instrumental -- as serving our learning about the more expansive world of thought and spirit. Aristotle favored a balanced life that involved moderation on the material side and exertion on the intellectual side. He said that "temperance and courage" were destroyed by either excess or deficiency and could only be preserved by following the golden mean.

**Puritan Views**

Paradoxically, although the United States is the world's most notoriously consumerist nation, the simple life has strong roots in American history. The early Puritan settlers brought to America their "puritan ethic," which stressed hard work, temperate living, participation in the life of the community and a steadfast devotion to things spiritual. Puritans also stressed the golden mean by saying we should not desire more material things than we can use effectively. It is from the New England Puritans that we get the adage, "Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without."

**Quaker Views**

The Quakers also had a strong influence on the American character, particularly with their belief that material simplicity was an important aid in evolving toward spiritual perfection. Unlike the Puritans, their strong sense of equality among people fostered religious tolerance. Quakers emphasized the virtues of hard work at one's calling, sobriety and frugality. Although they thought it only natural for one to enjoy the fruits of their labors, they also recognized that our stay on Earth is brief and that people should place much of their love and attention on things eternal.

**Transcendentalist Views**

Transcendentalist thought flourished in the early to mid-1800s in America and are best exemplified by the lives and writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Transcendentalists believed that a spiritual presence infuses the world, and that by living simply we can more easily encounter this vital life force. For Emerson, the Transcendental path began
with self-discovery and then led to "an organic synthesis of that self with the natural world surrounding it."

The Transcendentalists had a reverential attitude toward nature and saw the natural world as the doorway to the divine. By communing with nature, Emerson felt that people could become "part and parcel with God," thereby realizing the ultimate simplicity of oneness with the divine. Thoreau also viewed simplicity as a means to a higher end. Although he said that a person "is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone," he was not particularly concerned with the specific manner in which someone lived a simpler life. Instead, he was more interested in the rich inner life that could be gained through undistracted contemplation. For both Emerson and Thoreau, simplicity had more to do with one's intentions than with one's particular possessions.

As these examples illustrate, the simple life is not a new social invention -- its value has long been recognized. What is new is the urgent need to respond to the radically changing material and ecological circumstances in which humanity finds itself in the modern world. By whatever name, "simplicity" can be reclaimed as a path to a thriving future. How has simplicity served your life path?

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Duane Elgin is a speaker, author, and non-partisan activist for media accountability. He is the author of "Voluntary Simplicity," "The Living Universe," "Promise Ahead," and other books. Please visit his website, www.DuaneElgin.com for free articles and videos on thriving in these challenging times. Your comments and suggestions are much appreciated.

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July 13, 2011

Ethical Responsibility And Climate Change: We're All In The Same Boat

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Huffington Post

For more than 20 years I've been an educator and an activist in the religious environment movement -- both Jewish and interfaith. In a typical Q&A after a presentation, I'm often asked why I am motivated as a rabbi to speak out on the environment. I've reflected on this question for many years and have been able to trace my path to religious environmentalism to my earliest spiritual encounters in the natural world and through my theological and intellectual development that began while I was in rabbinical school.

But the most important influence on my decision to become part of this movement comes from the fact that I'm a parent. I learned about climate change from the scientists, and as the parent of two little girls (twins, now 32 years old), I worried about the world that they and their children
would live in. I assumed I would not live to see the most severe consequences of climate change, but they would.

Now, they have both grown up, and I have grandchildren. Now, I'm even more concerned. I grew up in a middle class suburb of Toronto. My family never lacked for food, clothing and other necessities. My parents sent me to summer camp in Northern Ontario, where I was able to spiritually encounter Creation on many canoe trips. I never thought that my descendants might not enjoy the same kind of life that I had. Now I do, and the immediate concern with my children and grandchildren's future has brought home to me the moral issue of climate change into a more immediate way.

Climate change is a moral issue. We must say this loudly and continually. I believe, as do many others in the religious environment movement, that this declaration has been missing in the debates over climate change policy. We have heard about economics and ecosystems and threats to our lifestyle, but not whether it is immoral for a society to prosper without concern about how their actions are negatively impacting the lives of others.

Part of the reason people don't see climate change in terms of morality is that it is not close to them in both time and space. Climate change is occurring gradually and its greatest impact will be in the future. We have trouble seeing how our actions will affect the future beyond our own lifespan. And the people who are already being affected are generally not people we know. They are an abstraction for whom it is difficult to be empathetic. But empathy is a key prerequisite for ethical action. That is why looking at my daughters and grandchildren motivates me to speak and to act. Just because we live in one of the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world does not guarantee that somehow they will be able to avoid the impact of climate change.

Yet there is also a moral imperative for me to look beyond my immediate family. I also have an ethical responsibility to those whom I don't know and to future generations who are not my descendants. I even have an ethical responsibility to non-human life. The common good extends to the whole biosphere and to life yet to emerge.

I began to better understand my wider responsibility several years ago when I was on a panel discussion at a conference at the United Nations on the moral implications of climate change. I was the religious voice on the panel. One of the other participants was the former U.N. ambassador from the South Pacific island nation of Tuvalu. I had never heard of Tuvalu, but I quickly learned that all its inhabitants, because of rising sea waters due to climate change, were making plans to leave and move to Australia. Within 20 years, Tuvalu will disappear, the first state in human history to cease to exist because of climate change. There are 10,000 people on Tuvalu and people have lived there for 3,000 years. Did the Tuvalese cause the climate change that will destroy their homeland and ancient culture? Who is responsible? I am. We are. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

Here is a great rabbinic midrash from around the second century C.E. on collective responsibility:
Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai taught: It is to be compared to people who were in a boat, and one of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath him. His companions say, "Why are you doing this?" He replied: "What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under myself?" They replied: "But you will flood the boat for us all!"

Recently, this midrash made me think about a monumental sculpture called "The Spirit of Haida Gwaii," which was created by the late Canadian Haida artist Bill Reid. (The Haida are a Pacific Northwest native tribe that lives in British Columbia.) It shows a traditional Haida cedar dugout canoe which carries 12 human and animal passengers representing the various animals and people of Haida mythology. This work is symbolic of the variety and interdependence of the natural environment of the Haida's homeland.

We are all in the same boat, humans born and still not born, animals born and still not born, the whole of the great Seder Bereshit, the Order of Creation that God declared "very good." Whether we continue to paddle through calm waters is up to us.


July 14, 2011

4 Jewish Summer Camps Sell "Fracking Rights" that Endanger Drinking Water, Food, Health, & Climate

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow
The Shalom Center

The Forward, the leading national Jewish weekly, has just reported that four Jewish summer camps in Pennsylvania have signed leases with gas exploration companies to allow “fracking” — the hydro-fracturing method of pouring tons of highly chemicalized water to smash shale rocks into releasing natural gas.

The four are Starlight’s Perlman Camp, which is owned and operated by B’nai B’rith; Camps Nesher and Shoshanim, which share a property in Lakewood and are owned and operated by the New Jersey Federation of YMHA and YWHA; and Camp Morasha, an independent camp in Lakewood.

The Forward reports that “Fracking of a single well creates more than 1 million gallons of wastewater awash in pollutants, including some radioactive materials. According to a February report in The New York Times, state and federal documents show that the wastewater is sometimes hauled to sewage plants not designed to treat it and then discharged into rivers that supply drinking water.”
The Shalom Center views it as a profound violation of Jewish wisdom and values for summer camps or other Jewish institutions to sell the rights to use their land in ways that will poison God’s and humanity’s earth, air, food, and water. *See below for actions you can take to halt this.*

Normal Federal protections for drinking water and clean air have been thwarted by the Halliburton Loophole pushed through Congress by former Vice-President Dick Cheney. It prevents application of these protective rules to drilling by the gas and oil industries. As a result, no one knows what chemicals are causing the dangers to water, food, and health that are appearing in fracking areas.

Fracking has turned the drinking water of farmers near well-heads into “water” that turns to flame when a match is lit at the kitchen faucets.

Fracking threatens the drinking water supply of the Philadelphia and New York City metropolitan areas, and has been charged with raising cancer rates in communities near fracking sites.

Fracking is also a planetary threat. Scientists at Cornell University have analyzed fracking and report that it leaks methane, a planet-heating gas much more powerful than CO2, at such a rate that “if you do an integration of 20 years following the development of the gas, [fracking] shale gas is worse than conventional gas and is, in fact, worse than coal and worse than oil.”

On September 7-8, the national commercial association of companies that are fracking shale rock regions will gather for a national convention in Philadelphia.

So environmental organizations are planning to face the “Fracking Association” with major demonstrations on September 7-8. The goal is at least 2500 demonstrators, with a rally, a march, a counter-conference, a “Blessing of the Waters,” and a free outdoor concert.

The Shalom Center is taking the lead in bringing together an interfaith planning committee to put together a “Blessing of the Waters” as part of the Sept 7-8 arrangements.

We invite religious folk, clergy and lay, who want to take part in these events to get in touch with us by writing Rabbi Arthur Waskow at Awaskow@theshalomcenter.org with “Interfaith Blessing Waters” in the subject line.

The two-day anti-fracking event will include: a large rally at the Philadelphia Convention Center from 8 am to noon, Wednesday September 7; a march through Philadelphia to Gov Corbett’s office that day; interfaith “Blessing of the Waters” at Penn’s Treaty Park on the Delaware River at 6 pm; an open-air free concert at 7 pm there; and on Thursday, an all-day conference to plan strategy to stop fracking.

Fracking is currently under a moratorium in New York, but Gov. Cuomo has indicated he may end the ban. New Jersey has just outlawed it, Wells have been drilled in parts of Pennsylvania. The Delaware River Port Authority has imposed a moratorium that may expire in September.
What you can do to stop fracking:

• Call your child’s summer camp to urge they NOT OK any leases or plans that might allow fracking.

• Call B’nai Brith/ BBYO at 202/857-6580 for Matther Grossman (Exec Dir) and YM-YWHA / Jewish Community Centers Assn at 212/ 532-4949 for Allan Finkelstein (CEO) and urge them to cancel the fracking leases of their summer camps.

• Sign a petition for a national ban on fracking here.

• If you live in NYS, call Gov Cuomo at 518/ 474-8390 and tell him to ban fracking throughout New York State. In Pennsylvania, call Gov. Corbett at 717/ 787-2500 with the same demand.

• Call your members of Congress and tell them to pass the FRAC Act to repeal the “Cheney-Halliburton” exemption for hydrofracking from environmental laws.

• Show the documentary film *Gasland* in your community. It documents the dangers of fracking. To get a DVD copy, click here.

• Save the dates of September 7-8 to attend the interfaith events on fracking in Philadelphia. Click here for more information.

• See our article here for background.

• For the full Forward article, click here.

Prepare to use Shabbat Noach, October 28-29, when Jews read the biblical story of the Flood, the Ark, and the Rainbow, as a time to address fracking and other threats to our planet, and act to heal our Earth in the spirit of the Rainbow.

To help The Shalom Center do this work to heal the Earth, please make a (tax-deductible) donation by clicking on our “Donate” banner on the left-hand column. Thanks!

http://www.theshalomcenter.org/content/4-jewish-summer-camps-sell-fracking-rights-endanger-drinking-water-food-health-climate

July 19, 2011

'Waking-Up' to a Conscious Future

By Dennis Kingsley
Huffington Post
Why don't we begin with a premise: that life is an evolutionary journey, and humankind is on an evolutionary path. Yet let us not get into a Darwinian frame of mind; instead, we can try to be open to some alternative thinking on this issue. Further, let us say that this journey toward more evolved forms of intellect, understanding and creativity requires capacities that lie latent within our very selves. Like many others before me, I will label this form of evolution as "conscious evolution." And to accept conscious evolution suggests we also accept that individually and collectively we have a responsibility toward our future. I put forward here that this involves purposeful thinking and action -- to use our creative capacities to guide our lives and the communities in which we live.

To envision a creative, dynamic and positive future is a preliminary step upon the path of conscious evolution. First, we make the choice for ourselves. Then, we give intention and commitment in order to give life to those choices. At its core, conscious evolution is a spiritual endeavour in that it affirms the potential capacity of each human to participate within a living universe. It also gives rise to a new worldview -- a new perceptual paradigm that views our evolutionary process as a lesser step within grander steps. The opposite of this (which has been prevalent for far too long) is for humanity to remain unconscious of its place within a universal narrative.

Conscious evolution is also a very real social movement providing for a higher level of cooperative communication and action. It is a collaborative understanding that offers personal development and learning, community building and assistance and ways towards practical, positive social change. Conscious evolution also implies that each human, each part, is an integral and interrelated part of the whole. The new sciences around quantum physics have revealed that the concept of integral relationships is now a reality; that all living organisms are energetically integrated within a shared informational and creative field. As an evolving species, we are encouraged to work together toward this synergy, or gestalt: where the whole is greater than its sum, and thus leads to emerging properties of the collective.

However, we can only function in accordance with our level of knowledge and capacity. We cannot be told what is, or what needs to be done; we can only be guided until that understanding becomes an inherent part of ourselves. Then we have an organic sense of how we should act to fit in with the dynamic whole. Yet we can modify our thoughts, action and behaviors through self-observation. We can learn to clear our minds of antiquated belief-systems and accumulated junk in order to allow these new thoughts to penetrate. We may think we learn, yet often we learn rote without the thinking. We should aim toward a conscious digestion of information -- to learn how to learn, to know how to know.

In a similar way, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin talks about the collective, unified soul of humankind as a "conspiracy" of individuals who conspire together to evolve to a new stage of life. De Chardin wrote tirelessly of how continued evolution toward cosmic spirit was a conscious duty hidden, sometimes forgotten, within humankind:

In us the world's evolution towards spirit has become conscious. Our perfection, our interest, our salvation as elements can depend therefore on nothing less than pushing this evolution forward
with all our strength. We may not yet understand exactly where it is taking us, but it is absurd for us to doubt that it is leading us towards some end of supreme value.\textsuperscript{1}

The over-arching question for de Chardin was how modern humanity could best organize, maintain and distribute the vital energies required for this process. In this there are precise conditions necessary for the storage and utilization of energies. In regard to living systems, in order to defy entropy living organisms are required to absorb, store, utilize and distribute energy. The human and the cosmos are both two examples of creative, dynamic, living systems; hence, the rules still apply. How we store and utilize our personal energies is of paramount importance and should become central to our lives.

This issue will become more central as we increasingly witness many of the material structures around us dissipating into a transparent fiction: our financial systems, our job securities, pensions, educational systems, etc. It is becoming increasingly difficult to believe that these structures will continue to provide for our needs. As our rafts search for land, our paddles are being taken away from us. So when we eventually find fertile land it will be from our own efforts -- and the cultivation that much more rewarding. As personal circumstances become more affected by the changes occurring in the world it will become necessary that people "wake-up" to new responsibilities and decisions. After all, the upcoming years will be different from what has gone before. And as these physical changes begin to impact and encroach upon each person's well-being, new voices will be rising and asking for assistance.

It is not my premise to debate the dominant western thought-paradigms of Darwinian "survivalist" evolution and religious Creationism. What I do suggest, however, is that there may well be an evolutionary "design" which allows for the creative development of living systems as well as planetary, solar and galactic systems: the micro and the macro. Yet as the changes in social and cultural systems increasingly manifest, it is hoped that more people will awaken to the understanding that their own evolving self requires conscious participation. Diligent work with oneself, with others and within the community is the action that guarantees a response.

Our behavior and actions within our communities will be better served if we can realize that we all exist integral to the earth's natural cycles and ecology. Further, that the living universe of which earth is a part is also the context and environment for our enduring reality. As cultural historian Thomas Berry says, "The archetypal journey of the universe can now be experienced as the journey of each individual, since the entire universe has been involved in shaping our individual psychic as well as our physical being from that first awesome moment when the universe emerged."\textsuperscript{2}

A new narrative is emerging, one where each person is integral to the larger picture; the journey of each one of us being a part of the journey as a whole. And a new story is emerging that tells us that the possibilities are open for humanity to engage in creating its way forward, consciously, and with harmony, balance and respect to all systems. This new human story gives us a renewed sense of meaning to our lives and makes us want to "wake up" each morning and each moment to this great enterprise.

A Victory for Protection of Sogorea Te

Press Release

After 98 days and nights of a continuous prayer vigil, the Committee to Protect Glen Cove is pleased to announce a victory in the struggle to protect the sacred grounds of Sogorea Te/Glen Cove.

Yesterday, the Yocha Dehe and Cortina tribes established a cultural easement and settlement agreement with the City of Vallejo and the Greater Vallejo Recreation District (GVRD). The agreement sets a legal precedent for granting Native peoples jurisdiction over their sacred sites and ancestral lands. The cultural easement forever guarantees that the Yocha Dehe and Cortina tribes will have legal oversight in all activities taking place on the sacred burial grounds of Sogorea Te/Glen Cove. It also represents a significant step forward in enacting tribal sovereignty, as the first such easement under CA Senate Bill 18 to be negotiated at the city and recreational district levels.

The agreement’s terms include elimination of the formerly planned restroom facility and relocation of a “downsized” parking lot to an area thoroughly tested to confirm that it contains no human remains or cultural remnants.

While the specifics of the deal leave some ambiguity about how GVRD’s park development project can and cannot proceed, the Committee is hopeful that Yocha Dehe and Cortina will use their newfound influence to make sure that the resting place of the ancestors is not further disturbed or desecrated.

“The cultural easement is an important victory, however we are concerned about the lack of specific language that would prevent grading on the western portion of the site,” states Corrina Gould (Chochenyo/Karkin Ohlone.) “We will be communicating this to the tribes and we have faith that they will take all necessary measures to ensure that ancestral remains and cremations are left undisturbed.”
Gould continued, “We appreciate and are humbled by the vast support that we have received in protecting our ancestors. It is our responsibility to continue to do the work to make certain that all of our sacred places are protected.”

The historical and cultural value of the 3,500-year old site has never been disputed and it continues to be spiritually important to California tribes. On April 14th, local Native Americans and supporters began a 24-hour prayer vigil at Sogorea Te to prevent the Greater Vallejo Recreation District from bulldozing/grading a large portion of the sacred site and constructing bathrooms and a parking lot.


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**July 28, 2011**

Gordon Kaufman, Leading Theologian, Dies

Harvard Divinity School Communications

Gordon Dester Kaufman, Edward Mallinckrodt, Jr. Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, died on Friday, July 22, at age 86.

A member of the Faculty of Divinity since 1963, Kaufman was a renowned liberal theologian whose research, writing, and teachings had a profound influence on constructive and systematic theology. He argued for a vision of God as the "profound mystery of creativity," the "ongoing creativity in the universe." By rethinking theology in naturalistic terms, he made significant contribution to discussions of religion and science, ecological issues, and evolution. His rethinking of the meaning of Jesus for today and his reimagination of central symbols of Christian tradition were significant for his engagement with religious pluralism and promotion of interfaith understanding.

"At the core of Gordon's theological imagination of God as mystery and creativity was his deep commitment to nonviolence, justice, and human flourishing," said Karen King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at HDS. "He was a deeply ethical, profoundly compassionate person, so that the lively intellectual conversations I and others so enjoyed with him were always grounded by his fundamental sense of joy and duty in connection to all living things. He was a great gift to his colleagues and students, and to the field of theology."

"Gordon Kaufman was one of the steadiest members of the HDS faculty, from his arrival to his retirement, in that he was always ready to take on students, talk out issues and disagreements with colleagues, and think about pedagogical strategies," said Dean William A. Graham. "His students are teaching religion around the globe today, and much of what they do will have been influenced for the better for their work with him."

"Gordon was an exceptional teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend—a powerful influence on my thinking, writing, working, and living," said George Rupp, president of the International Rescue Committee, HDS dean from 1979 to 1985, and past president of Columbia University.
Kaufman was born on June 22, 1925, in Newton, Kansas. He earned a bachelor of arts from Bethel College in Kansas in 1947. He went on to earn an MA in sociology from Northwestern University in 1948, a BD from Yale Divinity School in 1951, and a PhD in philosophical theology from Yale University in 1955, with a dissertation titled "The Problem of Relativism and the Possibility of Metaphysics." He was later awarded an honorary MA from Harvard in 1963, an LHD from Bethel College in 1973, and an LHD from Carleton College in 2007. Kaufman was ordained in 1953 in the General Conference Mennonite Church. He also served on the Bethel College Board of Directors from 1964 to 1976.

Kaufman served terms as president of the New England Region of the American Academy of Religion (1979–80), and later of the entire AAR (1981–82). He served a term as president of the American Theological Society (1979–80). He was also a member of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, and an active and longtime member of the Boston Theological Society.


Before coming to Harvard as professor of theology in 1963, Kaufman taught at Vanderbilt University as an associate professor of theology from 1958 to 1963 and at Pomona College as assistant professor of religion from 1953 to 1958. He taught and lectured widely, not only within the United States, but also internationally, holding numerous visiting professorships and lectureships, including at Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong (1991), University of Oxford (1986), University of South Africa, Pretoria (1984), Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan (1983), United Theological College in Bangalore, India (1976–77), and the Institute for Teachers of Systematic Theology, also in Bangalore (1988).

After more than three decades as a member of the Faculty of Divinity, Kaufman retired from Harvard Divinity School in 1995, but continued to mentor students and to teach part-time, as research professor, until his last course in 2009.

A prolific writer, Kaufman amassed an extensive bibliography of books, articles, and reviews. Among his many published works, in which he reimagined religious concepts and constructs in ways he believed would be more constructive in the modern world, are Relativism, Knowledge and Faith (1960), Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (1968) God the Problem (1972), Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other Mennonite Essays (1979), and In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology (1993), which won the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the "Constructive-Reflective" category of scholarly books on religion. In 1996, Fortress Press published Kaufman’s God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World. His two most recent books, also published by Fortress, are In the beginning . . . Creativity (2004) and Jesus and Creativity (2006). In these later works, he suggested that God is the "profound mystery of creativity," the "ongoing creativity in the universe."

He was the subject of a 1991 festschrift, titled Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman (ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney), and a 1996 volume titled Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman (ed. Alain Epp
Weaver). The Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought honored Kaufman at a special event in 2007 devoted to a discussion of his theological work on creativity, and those proceedings were published in the January 2008 issue of the American Journal of Theology and Philosophy.

"Gordon brought an unusual integrity to the task of theology, especially in his concern that Christian beliefs should be understood in ways that contribute to global issues of peace, to dialogue among the religions, and to environmental concerns," said Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Stillman Professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies at HDS.

A resident of Cambridge, Kaufman is survived by four children, David, Gretchen, Anne, and Edmund Kaufman, eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Dorothy Wedel, his wife since June 11, 1947, died in 1998.

A public memorial service is being planned for the fall. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made "in memory of Gordon D. Kaufman" to the Mennonite Central Committee, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501; or to Bethel College, Development Office, 300 E. 27th Street, N. Newton, KS 67117.


July 29, 2011

Take Back the Airwaves!

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

Although many recognize that individuals can be conscious of themselves, we seldom consider whether a whole society can be conscious of itself. Certainly at moments of great tragedy or great triumph there seems to be a capacity for millions of autonomous individuals to awaken to a collective consciousness. For example, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, an entire nation went into mourning and for several days, collectively acknowledged the passing of their leader. Another moment of shared consciousness occurred with the first lunar landing. For a few hours, much of the world paused to collectively watch the first humans walk on the moon. In recent times, the terrorist strike on the World Trade Towers in New York City shocked the world's consciousness into a time of collective attention.

The power of each of these events was not only in the sense of tragedy or triumph experienced by each person, but also in the awareness that this personal experience was being shared simultaneously by millions, even billions, of other persons. In the example of the moon landing, nearly the entire species was aware that it was passing through a historic moment in its evolution. Clearly, a society can be conscious of itself. The tools of mass communication make possible the awakening of our collective consciousness at scales ranging from person to planet.
These tools can provide vitally important, realistic communication during our time of great turning and transformation.

The human community now confronts a whole-systems crisis as powerful trends converge and reinforce one another: Climate disruption, the depletion of cheap oil, a growing chasm between the rich and poor, unsustainable population growth coupled with the extinction of other species, global food shortages, and many more. Within this decade, citizens of the Earth will be pressed to awaken to the actual condition of the Earth and begin to make profound changes in our manner of living, consuming and working in support of a sustainable future.

To realize a fundamental shift toward a life-affirming future in a voluntary manner, hundreds of millions of persons will be called to act in conscious cooperation with one another. Can we accomplish this leap to a new level of functioning in our collective consciousness as a local to global community? In my estimation: Absolutely yes! Our core evolutionary potential as a species lies largely unnoticed in the scientific name that we have given to ourselves as a species. Technically, our name is not *homo sapien* or "wise humans;" instead, we are *homo sapiens sapien* or "doubly wise humans." In other words, where many animals have the capacity "to know," humans have a distinct capacity "to know that we know."

Personal reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of consciousness and using this mirror to observe the unfolding of our lives. By analogy, social reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of collective consciousness by using tools such as television and the Internet. It is important to recall that it was television that enabled people to share in the large-scale, collective experiences described above. We were all looking through the window of television at the assassination of JFK, the landing on the moon, and the collapse of the World Trade Towers.

The bottom line is this: If we are to take practical steps to awaken collectively, then we must create a more reflective and responsive media environment. Although many people have turned away from television in disgust with its excessive commercialism and adolescent programming, the reality is that in the U.S. and around the planet, the overwhelming majority of people get most of their news about the world from this source. At this pivotal time in human history, we cannot afford to turn away from the primary technology that supports our collective communication and consciousness. To illustrate, here are adult alternatives to the adolescent programming that now dominates television:

- Authentic reality shows that dramatize a future of climate disruption and species extinction;
- Situation comedies that explore the humorous side of life in an "eco-village" of fifty or more people learning to live together, presenting both the challenges and the joys;
- "Electronic Town Meetings" where we discover ourselves as a community, nation, and world, and learn to collaborate together for a creative and promising future;
- Genuine survivor shows that take us inside of lives of the world's poorest citizens where we discover their humanity and their struggles.

Our challenging times call for we humans to step up and create a mainstream social movement concerned with media accountability for a new social consciousness: As citizens, we would give ourselves, and future generations, an enormous gift by consciously taking back the public
airwaves. We are massively under-utilizing our powerful communication technologies and as a result, we are losing the race between awakening and catastrophe. The core challenge of this generation is to mobilize our extraordinary tools of local-to-global connection and consciously communicate our way into a sustainable, meaningful, and thriving future. As the media goes, so goes our mass conversation and consciousness and, in turn, so goes our future. Let's take back the airwaves and our future.

Duane Elgin is a speaker, author and non-partisan activist for media accountability. He is the author of "Voluntary Simplicity," "The Living Universe," "Promise Ahead," and other books. Please visit his website, www.DuaneElgin.com for free articles and videos on thriving in these challenging times. Your comments and suggestions are much appreciated

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/duane-elgin/collective-consciousness-_b_879646.html

July 30, 2011

Coming Together to Pray, and Also to Find Reduced-Rate Energy Deals

By Mireya Navarro
New York Times

WASHINGTON — Like manna from heaven, thousands of dollars in new revenue is raining on a group of congregations here from the unlikeliest of sources: the utility bill.

The windfall arose after 11 churches and a nonprofit youth group got together to solicit reduced-rate bids for electricity — most of it from renewable energy sources — from local suppliers. In the first year of its contract, which ends in May, the group expects combined savings of nearly $100,000.

As the good word has spread, and it gears up to negotiate a second contract, the original group has swelled to 40 members. The bigger alliance plans to exercise even more leverage in the next round of negotiations by requiring bidders to extend the same discounted rate to individual parishioners and members.

And more revenue is on the way: the group is planning to take a cut of those residential savings as a kind of eco-tithe.

“These are not the kinds of things that are taught at seminary,” said the Rev. Dr. Donna Claycomb Sokol, pastor of Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church, which is joining the bulk purchasing this year. “How to save money with our energy — it’s innovative and exciting.”

With their cavernous sanctuaries, large meeting spaces and multi-use buildings often open day and night, churches, synagogues and other religious spaces are particularly clobbered by utility bills that can run into the thousands of dollars each month. Beyond dollars and cents, many congregations also consider environmental measures such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions as part of their duty to care for God’s creation.
The Energy Star program, which created a certification system for houses of worship a year and a half ago, calculates that by cutting energy use by at least 10 percent, the nation’s estimated 370,000 religious buildings could save a combined $315 million a year and reduce emissions by the equivalent of taking 240,000 cars off the road.

“That $315 million would be available for their missions helping the poor and the needy,” said Maura Beard, a spokeswoman for Energy Star.

Many congregations already treat the environment as a fundamental part of their mission. Officials with Interfaith Power & Light, a network of religious institutions with affiliates in 38 states, said members are installing solar panels, undertaking energy-saving retrofits, buying green power, instilling a love for the earth in sermons and lobbying elected officials for clean energy alternatives.

“It’s about values and moral responsibility,” said the Rev. Canon Sally G. Bingham, the Episcopalian minister who founded the network in San Francisco in 2000 and has seen it grow to 14,000 members, with nearly half of them signing on in the last four years.

“Some are doing it for financial reasons, but most do it because of the devastating effects of pollution on poor people,” she said. “Every mainstream religion has a mandate to serve each other, especially the poor.”

The churches in Washington forged their alliance with help from the Washington Interfaith Network, which does community organizing for member congregations and is now receiving a 10 percent cut of the overall electricity savings. The other group that helped bring the churches together, the DC Project, is a nonprofit that promotes weatherization and green energy jobs.

Felipe Witchger, the lead organizer with the DC Project, said that the next contract will require participants, which now also include synagogues and affiliates like unions and advocacy groups, to either buy renewable energy or commit to energy-efficiency upgrades. For the upgrades, he said, workers from neighborhoods with high unemployment and poverty rates would be hired.

At St. Columba’s Episcopal Church in northwest Washington, an environmental committee was created from the congregation of 3,800 several years ago to come up with energy-saving measures like installing motion sensor lights and purchasing wind power through the local utility.

Still, said Paul J. Barkett, the church’s chief operating officer, St. Columba’s faced monthly energy bills that averaged $8,000, mostly to heat and cool two buildings housing the church, which opens its showers, washers and dryers to about 35 of the community’s homeless people.

St. Columba’s now expects to save up to $12,000 a year after joining the purchasing group. The church operates on an annual budget of $2.4 million that is mostly drawn from parishioners’ contributions, he said.

“Every dollar we’re not giving to Pepco for electricity,” Mr. Barkett said, referring to the local utility, “it’s a dollar we can put into our mission and ministry and furthering our presence.”
It is not unusual for businesses, municipalities, schools and other institutions to come together to buy electric power in bulk for a discounted price, said the Retail Energy Supply Association, a trade group. But congregations banding together across denominations — and working into their contract energy efficiency improvements and residential discounts for members — are fairly new, some energy companies said. This is possible in markets like Washington and 16 other states where multiple power suppliers compete for business.

In its first year, this approach will result in electric bills that are 15 to 20 percent lower and annual savings that range from a few thousand dollars to $33,000 per institution, according to the DC Project.

Some companies are particularly excited about the potential to add thousands of residential customers through the religious group.

“We’re now getting new customers in the D.C. marketplace in a very innovative way,” said Nelson Reyneri, vice president for national accounts at Liberty Power, the national retail energy company based in Florida that won the group’s first contracts and plans to bid again. But not all congregations are buying green power, which sells for about $1 more per megawatt hour than conventional energy.

“I’m not sure that I understand the whole green thing,” said the Rev. Al Hammer, an associate pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church.

“You’re not really buying green power,” he said. “You’re basically buying credits, and it gets really confusing. I’d rather move away from that until they get it clear.”

So for now, he said, he will stick with conventional power and use the savings to fix the church’s drafty windows.

The Rev. Thomas J. Knoll of First Trinity Lutheran Church said he worries that energy savings may not be sustainable themselves if electricity prices fluctuate too much and an increase shrinks the pot of money his church is relying on.

Though cautious in his enthusiasm, Mr. Knoll said the expected discounts, in particular for individual members of his 140-member congregation, would come in handy as a recruiting pitch.

“I’d say to people: if you join this church, you can also apply for a lower electric rate,” he said. “Why wouldn’t I do that? It’s the truth.”


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August 1, 2011

World Sacred Forests Mapped Out

By David A Gabel
Environmental News Network
A team of scientists from the University of Oxford are working on a world map which shows all the land owned or revered by various world religions. This "holy map" will display all the sacred sites from Jerusalem's Western Wall, to Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, to St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. Just as interesting, the map will also show the great forests held sacred by various religions. Within these protected lands dwell a wide variety of life and high numbers of threatened species.

The sacred land mapped out by the Oxford researchers is not necessarily owned by a certain religious community, but rather contains sacred connotations. They estimate that about fifteen percent of all land on Earth is "sacred land", and eight percent of all land is owned by a religious community. Much of the land held sacred is forest.

The Oxford researchers are focused on determining this land's value in terms of biodiversity. They are from the Biodiversity Institute in the Oxford Martin School. A lot of the sacred forests managed by the local community, but receive no formal protection. The researchers hope that their scientific study will help guarantee official protection from regional and national governments.

Initially, efforts were only made to map out land controlled by the large mainstream religious groups. Teaming up with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), the Oxford team decided to investigate religious land controlled by all groups. The new initiative is in effect, as the team has already planned visits to areas in India, Ghana, Japan, and elsewhere.

The first step in their research is to delineate where the sacred land is by investigating where boundary lines. The status of the land and its borders must be known before a biodiversity assessment can take place. The researchers will also assess the land's value in carbon dioxide absorption, its abundance of medicinal plants, as well as the value to the local people.

According to Dr. Kathy Willis, one of the researchers at Oxford's Biodiversity Institute, "One of the key research themes of the Biodiversity Institute is conservation beyond protected areas. With the help of emerging technologies, the Biodiversity Institute researchers are developing tools that can help evidence-based research."

"We urgently need to map this vast network of religious forests, sacred sites and other community-conserved areas to understand their role in biodiversity conservation," added Dr. Shonil Bhagwat, also on the research team. "Such mapping can also allow the custodian communities, who have protected these sites for generations, to secure their legal status."

For more information: http://www.biodiversity.ox.ac.uk/
http://www.enn.com/ecosystems/article/43012

August 1, 2011
Holy Land Council in Jerusalem tackles climate change

China Daily

JERUSALEM (Xinhua) -- The Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL), an interfaith committee situated in Jerusalem that includes the chief leaders of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, recently endorsed the Declaration on Climate Change to promote environmental sustainability, and some believe it might lead to positive spillover in regional politics as well.

"At a time when people around the world are confronting the challenge of climate change, religious leaders here are working together to promote action on the issue," Rabbi Yonatan Neril, ICSD founder and executive director, told Xinhua on the sidelines of a press conference.

The holy land council is comprised of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Heads of the local churches of the Holy Land, the Ministry of Islamic Waqf at the Palestinian Authority, and the Islamic Sharia Courts of the Palestinian Authority.

"People of many faiths draw inspiration from their respective traditions to live sustainably, and these efforts cross-pollinate each other and encourage co-existence on our shared planet and in this land," Neril said.

RELIGION'S BROADCASTING POWER

Neril noted that a different, grimmer scenario has been painted by thousands of scientists over the world: rainforests shrinking, deserts expanding, storms intensifying, the planet heating.

In an open letter addressed to the religious community as early as 1990, scientists wrote: "Mindful of our common responsibility, we scientists, many of us long engaged in combating the environmental crisis, urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth."

Religions are viewed as a powerful force as they could serve as an important vehicle to promote greater environmental awareness.

Scientists aren't the only ones to recognize the important impact the world's religions could have in broadcasting environmental awareness throughout their constituencies worldwide.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said last year that religions are an untapped source of hope for the ecological future of humanity and that this must be taken into account in any further efforts to safeguard the environment.

"We have to permeate all levels of society, speak about these topics in our churches, synagogues, and mosques, about how to take care of nature," Bishop William Shomali of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem told Xinhua.
Rabbi David Rosen, one of the Council members who also served as a liaison in presenting the declaration to all 15 council members, told Xinhua he believed the impact of the holy land court would be especially significant outside the holy land.

"Outside, whether it is in Asia, America, Africa or elsewhere when they see a statement coming from the religious leadership of the holy land, and added to that from a united voice, it will strengthen and empower those political leaders who want to take action to feel that they have significant religious authority behind them to do so," Rosen said.

IMPLEMENTATION QUESTIONABLE

"The Koran mentions the relationship between nature and human beings in a beautiful way, urging us not only to take advantage of all that nature has to offer, but also take care of it," Haj Salah Zuheika, a Muslim member of the Council and Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs for the Palestinian Authority, told Xinhua.

"Although the importance of the environment is addressed within religion, the problem lies in how to apply that theological message," Zuheika said.

"There is a gap between what religions say and how their goals are implemented," he added.

Rosen noted that a Jewish concept called "baal tashchit," which means "do not destroy," lies at the base of Judaism's belief in preserving the environment.

This verse, which specifically concerns protecting fruit trees on enemy territory, is understood by the Rabbis to exemplify a general principle of nature preservation.

They extend the specific situation of not destroying the trees of one's enemy during wartime to anxiously protecting all of nature, at all times.

"From that, Judaism has extrapolated not to destroy anything, and even avoid extravagance in personal conduct and lifestyle," Rosen said. "We need to highlight this concept in order create greater awareness and responsibility."

SPILOVER INTO POLITICS

Shomali noted that spreading the message on environmental sustainability would take a lot of effort and patience, but ultimately also provided an opportunity for building a brighter future.

"It's like putting seeds in the earth. They should be carefully watered to enable them to grow," Shomali said. "The young people involved may be the leaders of tomorrow," he added, noting that their joint effort today would allow for improved coexistence on all levels in the future.

"This event showed how cooperation around environmental issues can spur coexistence among Israelis and Palestinians," Neril said. "This is an example of how our shared environmental challenges can play a key role in contributing to co-existence on the land, and how coexistence on the land can then help us to achieve environmental sustainability," he added.
The ICSD works to cultivate groups of Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders with a shared understanding of the human and environmental challenges facing the region.

"Our work facilitates environmental change alongside healing to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Neril said. "We also enable these religious leaders to find common cause through common teachings on environmental sustainability and human coexistence."

"We are accountable because we are not here permanently. We have to leave the earth behind clean for the next generation," Shomali said. "Earth is like our home and those who live in the same home should know how to cohabitate. If the earth is polluted it is polluted for Muslims, Christians and Jews together," he added.

http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2011-08-02/content_3371789.html

August 16, 2011

The Religion and Ecology of the Blang Minority Nationality

By James Miller
Sustainable China blog

The question of how to promote a culture of ecological sustainability in China took me this summer to conduct exploratory fieldwork among the Blang minority nationality, in Yunnan province, close to the border between China and Myanmar. The Blang are one of China’s smaller nationality groups and occupy a remote mountainous terrain that is a gruelling and dangerous three-hour drive from the county town of Menghai.

The economy of the Blang village where I stayed was based increasingly on the production of tea. Previously subsistence farmers, the villagers had now turned almost exclusively to the production of tea leaves which, when processed, become the famous and expensive pu’er tea. Since the economic and land reforms after the cultural revolution, the villagers had been steadily converting their lands to the production of tea, with tea bushes now dominating the steeply-terraced mountainsides. After harvesting the tea leaves, the villagers dry and lightly roast the tea leaves before selling them via middlemen to nearby tea factories that ferment, process and package the finished product.

The village is distinguished by well-preserved social customs: villagers are divided into a number of exogamous clans; newly married men live in their wife’s family’s home for three years; and most young men spend a period of time as a Buddhist monk in their youth. The Blang, like many nationalities in southwest China are Theravada Buddhists, but their highly complex religious life is also informed by local beliefs and customs that relate to the traditional ecology, with special attention being paid to rice, water, bees, beeswax, and the various local spirits that are associated with them. The production of tea has not been integrated into the religious life of the village and remains detached from it. On the other hand the relative wealth that has come to the village has enabled the renovation of old temples, the construction of new ones, and the
hosting of lavish religious festivals, including the Kaowasa festival, known in Chinese as
**guanmenjie** 关门节, a Theravada Buddhist festival to mark the beginning of the rainy season.

Here the relationship between religion and ecology becomes more evident. During the three
month period inaugurated by Kaowasa, injunctions are placed on the life of the monks and
laypeople in the village. Most notably these include a prohibition on cutting down large trees. In
traditional times such large trees might be cut down and used for building houses. While most of
the houses in the village are still made of wood, the more important reason for cutting down trees
nowadays is to increase the land available for tea production.

Four important points can be made here. The first is that there is clear evidence of religion
playing an influential role in managing the direct relationship between the Blang people and their
local ecosystems. Their religious life is not a matter of private belief or personal spirituality, but
a cultural system that clearly intersects with ecological and economic systems. In this regard, at
least, religion is a cultural force that acts as a constraint upon a economic activity that has a
deleterious effect on the local environment.

Secondly, in this regard at least, the Blang religion supports Chinese government policy and law
which prevents deforestation. While I was in the village, I saw that this policy is supported by
educational programs that aim to get local people to understand the important relationship
between forests, water and the livelihood of local ecosystems. What struck me was that in this
regard, religion could clearly be an ally towards government policy and environmental policy.
When I interviewed a local CCP member, he informed me that the Party did not put up any
obstacles to his participation in local religious activities, but would certainly view the spread of
non-indigenous religions such as Christianity as highly problematic.

Thirdly, the complex and lavish nature of the religious activities in the village were directly
supported by the village’s economic development. Without the wealth brought by tea
monoculture, it would hardly be possible to support the scale of religious activities that I
witnessed. The village’s wealth could clearly be seen in the renovation of the main temple, and
the building of a new pagoda outside the village. This pagoda was built upon the advice of a
visiting Burmese monk and was located according to fengshui principles to ensure that the
wealth generated in the village would as much as possible remain in the village. Economic
development supports religious activities, and in turn religious activities are designed to support
economic development.

The final point relates to the power of Buddhism as a transnational religion. The border between
China and Myanmar was clearly a notional border for the local people. Commercial, religious
and family relationships straddled the border, and villagers were able to cross easily into Burma
by foot. Some monks had spent time in Thailand and were able to live there without any
passport, so long as they had proof of their religious status.

From my exploratory research it seems clear that there exists a complex relationship between
religion, economy, ecology and nationality among the Blang people that is deserving of much
deeper study and analysis. At the same time, it is not clear how long these relationships will
remain intact. The current five year plan holds out the prospect of a proper paved road from the
village to the county town. This will make communications with the “outside world” far easier
and undoubtedly bring momentous changes to the religious, economic and social life of the village.


August 21, 2011

Tar Sands and the Carbon Numbers

New York Times

This page opposes the building of a 1,700-mile pipeline called the Keystone XL, which would carry diluted bitumen — an acidic crude oil — from Canada’s Alberta tar sands to the Texas Gulf Coast. We have two main concerns: the risk of oil spills along the pipeline, which would traverse highly sensitive terrain, and the fact that the extraction of petroleum from the tar sands creates far more greenhouse emissions than conventional production does.

The Canadian government insists that it has found ways to reduce those emissions. But a new report from Canada’s environmental ministry shows how great the impact of the tar sands will be in the coming years, even with cleaner production methods.

It projects that Canada will double its current tar sands production over the next decade to more than 1.8 million barrels a day. That rate will mean cutting down some 740,000 acres of boreal forest — a natural carbon reservoir. Extracting oil from tar sands is also much more complicated than pumping conventional crude oil out of the ground. It requires steam-heating the sands to produce a petroleum slurry, then further dilution.

One result of this process, the ministry says, is that greenhouse gas emissions from the oil and gas sector as a whole will rise by nearly one-third from 2005 to 2020 — even as other sectors are reducing emissions. Canada still hopes to meet the overall target it agreed to at Copenhagen in 2009 — a 17 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020. If it falls short, as seems likely, tar sands extraction will bear much of the blame.

Canada’s government is committed to the tar sands business. (Alberta’s energy minister, Ronald Liepert, has declared, “I’m not interested in Kyoto-style policies.”) The United States can’t do much about that, but it can stop the Keystone XL pipeline.

The State Department will decide whether to approve or reject the pipeline by the end of the year. It has already delivered two flawed reports on the pipeline’s environmental impact. It should acknowledge the environmental risk of the pipeline and the larger damage caused by tar sands production and block the Keystone XL.

August 21, 2011

Vermont Law School Professor and Middlebury Scholar Arrested at White House Protest

By Kevin J. Kelley
Blurt: 7 Days Staff Blog

A Vermont Law School professor and a Middlebury College scholar were arrested in front of the White House on Saturday at the start of the environmental movement's biggest series of civil-disobedience protests in decades.

Some 65 demonstrators were handcuffed and taken away in police vans as they sought to dramatize opposition to a pipeline that would carry huge quantities of oil — and thus climate-changing carbon — from Canadian sands to Texas refineries. The well-dressed lawbreakers had targeted the White House because President Obama has sole power to approve or kill the $7 billion project.

“If Barack Obama mans up and says no to this thing, it will send a surge of electricity through all the people who voted for him three years ago,” Middlebury's Bill McKibben (pictured above) said in an interview prior to his arrest.

With an Obama '08 button pinned to the lapel of his gray suit jacket, McKibben told a crowd in Lafayette Park on Pennsylvania Avenue, “I'm a law-abiding citizen. This isn't something that comes naturally to me.”

Gus Speth, 69, is likewise the sort of figure more accustomed to cufflinks than handcuffs. The VLS faculty member is well acquainted with the White House, however — generally from inside its gates. Speth served from 1977 to 1981 as chairman of President Jimmy Carter's Council on Environmental Quality. His establishmentarian credentials also include the leadership of the United Nations Development Program and the World Resources Institute.

Getting arrested will have proven worthwhile, Speth said prior to defying police orders to move along, “if that's what it takes to get people to understand what's at stake.”

Noting that he's been in the state only a couple of years, Speth said “it's impressive how many of the right kinds of steps are being taken in Vermont. I do feel at home there.”

McKibben pointed out that on a per capita basis, Vermont accounts for the largest share of the 1500 climate-change campaigners who have pledged to get arrested at the White House during the next two weeks. “That makes me very proud,” McKiben said. “And there's still plenty of time for more to sign up.”

A busload of disobedient Vermonters will travel from Burlington to Washington next Sunday (August 28). Information on the action is available at world.350.org/vermont.
Saturday's arrests were carried out in a ritualistic fashion resembling the children's game of “duck, duck goose.” U.S. Park Police officers tapped the shoulders of seated or standing demonstrators one by one over the course of about 90 sweltering minutes. The protestors then extended their hands behind their backs to facilitate handcuffing as those still on the sidewalk applauded and chanted their appreciation. In an odd bit of chivalry, the cops first led away all the women.

Will the sit-ins succeed?

McKibben is not confident they will. Lobbyists pushing for the pipeline represent interests that “usually win,” he noted.

And rejecting the pipeline will not be an easy choice for Obama, McKibben added. “You have to feel some sympathy for the guy,” he told his fellow activists. “There's enormous pressure on the White House from the fossil-fuel industry,” specifically from Exxon-Mobil — “a company that has the most money in the history of money.”


August 24, 2011

Green groups add to pressure on Obama

By Ben Geman
The Hill

Top officials with several prominent environmental groups are voicing support for demonstrations at the White House that call for President Obama to block a pipeline that would greatly expand imports from Canada’s oil sands.

Their joint letter Wednesday adds to the political pressure on the White House over the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, signifying that it’s emerging as a priority for a key part of Obama’s liberal base.

Signers include the heads of the League of Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club, which have the environmental movement’s largest political operations, as well as the Environmental Defense Fund, a group more often known for playing a less confrontational, inside game (although that may be changing).

“It’s perhaps the biggest climate test you face between now and the election. If you block it, you will trigger a surge of enthusiasm from the green base that supported you so strongly in the last
election. We expect nothing less,” states the letter from top officials with groups that also include the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Environment America, Greenpeace, 350.org, Friends of the Earth, and the Rainforest Action Network.

More than 275 people have now been arrested near the White House in civil disobedience protests that began Saturday, organizers say. See E2’s earlier coverage of the protests here, here and here.

Here is the text of the letter:

Dear President Obama:

Many of the organizations we head do not engage in civil disobedience; some do. Regardless, speaking as individuals, we want to let you know that there is not an inch of daylight between our policy position on the Keystone Pipeline and those of the very civil protesters being arrested daily outside the White House. This is a terrible project – many of the country’s leading climate scientists have explained why in their letter last month to you. It risks many of our national treasures to leaks and spills. And it reduces incentives to make the transition to job-creating clean fuels.

You have a clear shot to deny the permit, without any interference from Congress. It’s perhaps the biggest climate test you face between now and the election. If you block it, you will trigger a surge of enthusiasm from the green base that supported you so strongly in the last election. We expect nothing less.

Sincerely,

Fred Krupp, Environmental Defense Fund

Michael Brune, Sierra Club

Frances Beinecke, Natural Resources Defense Council

Phil Radford, Greenpeace  Larry Schweiger, National Wildlife Federation

Erich Pica, Friends of the Earth

Rebecca Tarbotton, Rainforest Action Network

May Boeve, 350.org

Gene Karpinski, League of Conservation Voters

Margie Alt, Environment America
August 29, 2011

Lessons From Central Cell Block

By Bill McKibben
The Nation

I’m a wuss.

I figured that out on August 20, when a guard was leading me down the cellblock in manacles and leg irons, and I looked through the bars of one cage, and there was Dan Choi, the former Army lieutenant turned gay rights activist.

I knew he’d been arrested with us that morning outside the White House, protesting a climate-killing pipeline called Keystone XL, planned to run from the tar sands of Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. But it was only now, in the DC jail’s Central Cell Block, that it really struck me what his participation meant. He’d been down this road before—arrested three times outside the White House, galvanizing the successful effort to end “don’t ask, don’t tell”—so unlike the rest of us, he had a pretty good sense of how his day would end. He did it anyway.

He did it even though climate change isn’t his issue. I didn’t come forward to do time for gay marriage, or immigration reform or any of the other things I believe in; I’m an environmentalist. So looking at Dan made me understand what solidarity looks like—how those of us on the fringe should be uniting to provide common pressure on an administration and a Congress that rarely feels enough heat to veer from the corporate status quo.

Mostly, though, I felt like a wuss—and not just because I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to come back to prison (two nights in Central Cell Block is exactly as much fun as it sounds like). I felt like a wuss because this kind of tough politics scares me. It’s hard for me to take on a president I worked to elect, hard to say the plain truth: that on environmental issues he’s been content to make small changes around the edge but unwilling to use the power of his office to make real change.

Take this pipeline, for example; it should be the easiest of calls. It will be the main outlet for oil from what is the second-largest pool of carbon on the planet, after only Saudi Arabia. But when we struck oil in Saudi Arabia we didn’t know about global warming. Now we do—enough to know that if we fully develop this field, in the words of NASA scientist James Hansen, it’s “essentially game over for the climate.” Any president who heard those words from his most renowned federal atmospheric scientist would, you think, stop the project dead. Especially a president who, on the night of his nomination, promised that during his presidency the “rise of the oceans will begin to slow, and the planet begin to heal.”
And yet the administration has done nothing of the sort. The State Department gave the project a green light [2] in its environmental impact statement, dismissing the threat of sharp increases in carbon emissions. The usual Washington chicanery has been fully in evidence: the pipeline company hired Hillary Clinton’s former deputy campaign manager as its chief lobbyist, and Wikileaks documents showed American envoys working with the Canadian oil barons to produce “favorable media coverage.” President Obama, by all insider accounts, is likely to sign the “certificate of national interest” the project requires. Faced with a choice between the base that elected him and Big Oil, everyone assumes the president will go with Exxon.

What makes it so egregious is that the president, for once, can’t blame Congress. The House and Senate have no role in this process.

Which is why we’ve been out here in front of the White House going on two weeks, with a new wave of fifty to 100 people showing up every morning to get arrested. It’s mostly old people—I’m 50, and I was on the younger edge of people in my cellblock. We’re wearing suits and ties. We’re being as polite as can be—even to the president. Instead of saying, “We won’t vote for you if you do the wrong thing,” we’re saying, “Think how charged-up your supporters will be if you do the right thing.” That’s a good political argument, I think—one look at the 2010 elections demonstrates the problem of a demoralized base—but maybe it’s too wussy for our political moment. Maybe we need to say: you promised certain things, and you aren’t delivering. Why should we follow you any more?

There’s at least some sign the protests are making a difference. Within the normally fractious environmental movement, the leaders of every major group came together on the fifth day of the protests to issue a stronger letter to the president than I’ve ever seen them make. From the corporate-friendly Environmental Defense Fund to anti-corporate Greenpeace, one message: there’s not “an inch of daylight” between our positions on the pipeline and those of the people being arrested outside your house. Your decision will be “the biggest climate test between now and the election,” and you simply must block it. “We expect nothing less.”

The question, I suppose, will come if he allows the pipeline to proceed. Does the threat of a global-warming denier in the White House cause us to kiss and make up? I don’t know—like I said, I’m a wuss. But there’s clearly something in the air—progressive groups across a wide variety of issues are beginning to sense that they need Obama to keep his promises now, precisely so they can go to work for him with a clear heart. And we’re beginning to see that he’ll need us; in a New York Times article about the pipeline protests, Julian Zelizer [3], a Princeton political analyst said, “I think a year ago President Obama felt he could do things that might alienate his base and organizations important to the Democratic Party and get away with it because in the end most Democrats wouldn’t go for a Republican…. Now he might pay a price for it.”

It’s not a threat—it’s more just like reality. Physics and chemistry dictate that we can’t put more carbon into the atmosphere; political science dictates you can’t ignore your friends’ top priorities.
September 1, 2011

For Protesters, Keystone Pipeline Is Line In Tar Sand

By Richard Harris
NPR: All Things Considered

Dozens of environmental activists showed up in front of the White House Thursday to get arrested in a peaceful protest against a proposed oil pipeline that would cut across the American Midwest.

Organizers said that over the past 10 days, about 800 people have been handcuffed and bused off to a police station in this ongoing action.

At issue is a proposed pipeline that would connect oil resources in Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the Texas coast. The 1,700-mile long Keystone XL, as it's called, would help our friendly northern neighbor expand development in one of the largest, but dirtiest, sources of oil on the planet. It's bound up in hardened formations called tar sands, and it's not easy to extract.

The State Department has issued an environmental review giving the transnational Keystone pipeline a green light. Some state governors and high-profile climate scientists say building the pipeline would be a mistake.

The Obama administration says it will decide by the end of the year whether to approve this pipeline. And environmental groups are making that decision a test of the administration's resolve to move away from fossil fuels and toward cleaner sources of energy.

A Message To The President

And that's where the White House protests come in.

"We're trying to send a message to Barack Obama and America that we got to get off the dirty energy treadmill, because catastrophe is looming if we don't," said Jim Sconyers, 67, who came in from West Virginia to take part in the protest.

He had $100 in his pocket, which is the fine he expected to pay once he gets arrested at the highly choreographed sit-in. He said tar sands are much worse for the environment than what we pump out of the ground elsewhere.

"Oh, my God, it's tremendously dirtier," said Sconyers. "The sands themselves are, you know, it's sand, listen to the name — it's not just liquid oil that comes flowing out like in a regular oil well." The tar sands get cooked with natural gas burners to liberate the oil, so producing the oil adds emissions to the atmosphere.
Liz Barratt-Brown, from the Natural Resources Defense Council, was also at the protest. She said that emissions from producing oil for the Keystone XL pipeline would be about the same as building seven new coal-fired power plants.

"When you think about bringing a pipeline in that's the equivalent of seven new plants, I actually think that's quite significant," she said.

**A Unique Geologic Treasure**

Of course, the Earth's fate doesn't hinge on the emissions equivalent of a few additional coal plants. But activist Bill McKibben, who helped organize this protest, isn't just thinking about what the Keystone XL pipeline would deliver. He's concerned that if the pipeline goes ahead, the oil-sands industry would really take off and exploit the vast Canadian deposits.

"This pipeline is a bad idea. The tar sands at the far end of it are the second biggest pool of carbon on the Earth, and if we burn them, if we burn them in a big way, as NASA's Jim Hansen said, it's essentially game over for the climate," he said. Hansen is a NASA climate scientist who was among the protesters arrested this week.

For McKibben, this really is the moment of truth, akin to what Brazil did 15 years ago, when it took serious steps to preserve the Amazon rain forest.

"That was a unique biological treasure," he said. "North America has a unique geological treasure: this tar sands formation. Why don't we have the same kind of responsibility to the world to just keep that oil in the ground?"

**Politics in the Pipeline**

And there's another reason environmental activists have galvanized around this issue: the politics of the moment.

Protester Courtney Hight said she campaigned for Obama in 2008, she worked for him after the election, and she's putting her hope in him now.

"This is an opportunity where the president can make the decision and he doesn't actually have to engage Congress, which has been particularly a road block in a lot of the progress that I think the president has tried to make," said Hight. "This is a chance where he can actually make the decision."

Around 11:30 Thursday morning, the crowd across from the White House looked on as their colleagues started getting arrested and squired onto a waiting bus.

Elevating the Keystone XL pipeline to a symbol carries some risks. Many Americans believe we should be promoting oil development to help keep the price of oil in check. The pipeline oil is too small a fraction of global oil supply to make a significant difference one way or the other, but the symbolism — to drill or not to drill — cuts both ways.

"If you expect the president to kill every development that marginally increases greenhouse gas emissions, and conclude that if he doesn't, then he's not serious about climate change, you'll be sorely disappointed," said Michael Levi of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "This is a pragmatic president, and he is not going to decide everything just based on symbolism."
And the fact is, American automobiles are already burning oil from the Canadian tar sands. Other pipelines bring in about a million barrels a day. The Keystone XL would not even double our imports of this dirty but abundant crude.

Listen to the story:


September 1, 2011

Decision on Canadian tar sands pipeline is chance for Obama to fulfill an environmental promise

By Russell Powell
New Haven Register

SIXTY-five people, including me, were arrested Aug. 20 and spent the weekend in jail for holding a nonviolent sit-in in front of the White House. It was the first day of a planned two weeks of civil disobedience, where thousands from across the country would sit down to demonstrate against the proposed construction of the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline.

Tapping the tar sands in northern Alberta, Canada, has been called the most destructive project on Earth. Alberta’s once-pristine boreal forest, a wilderness the size of Florida, produces crude oil. To extract it from the tar sands requires more water than a city of 2 million people, and an astounding 36 million tons of carbon dioxide are emitted every day.

Developing the process has created the biggest industrial development in the world. Stephen Harper, Canada’s prime minister, called tar sands development an epic undertaking, akin to building the pyramids in Egypt or the Great Wall of China, only bigger.

The effects on the environment and human health have been disastrous. A virtual wasteland has replaced one of the largest, and last, unspoiled forests in the world.

Each day, the project produces more carbon — which heats the atmosphere, causing erratic weather — than 1.3 million cars. Its wastewater runs into the ground and nearby rivers, affecting local people, who have cancer rates nearly 400 times that of other Canadians.

Keystone XL is a proposed pipeline to move crude oil from the tar sands to oil refineries in Texas. It would be the first in a massive network of pipelines that potentially could extend into New England. It poses serious risks of further environmental degradation and to public health. The Keystone pipeline, Keystone XL’s smaller precursor, has been in operation just one year and already has leaked 12 times.

Keystone XL’s planned route from Canada through six states crosses some of America’s great wilderness and agricultural areas.
The pipeline would cross the Oglalla Aquifer, a vast yet shallow water source that reaches across Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. A leak in the pipeline would have disastrous consequences for this aquifer, which provides 27 percent of the water for irrigated U.S. farmland and drinking water for 82 percent of the people who live in the aquifer’s territory.

Proponents of Keystone XL cite more jobs and less dependency on overseas oil.

Both arguments are myopic. Construction of a 1,700-mile pipeline will undoubtedly create some jobs, but they will be short-term and disappear when construction ends. And while dependence on overseas oil might decline somewhat, the greenhouse gases Keystone XL would bring are far too high a cost.

Since the pipeline needs approval of the U.S. State Department, its fate rests solely with President Barack Obama. He could kill Keystone XL, which author and environmentalist Bill McKibben has called a potential “1,700-mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the continent.”

I am one of thousands of concerned citizens who have decided to risk arrest by sitting-in outside the White House, demonstrating to the president that he has the popular support for making the courageous decision to stop Keystone XL. It is a chance for him to make good on his promise that, under his administration, “the oceans will begin to slow their rise and the planet will begin to heal.”

Russell Powell is a student at Yale Divinity School and an environmental advocate. He can be reached at russell.powell@yale.edu.

http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2011/09/01/opinion/doc4e5eade0afb86241943951.txt

September 1, 2011

Sitting down, so Obama will stand up

By Russ Powell
Yale Daily News

With great fervor, I, together with millions of hopeful Americans, went to the polls in 2008 to vote for Barack Obama. In the months leading up to the presidential election he had galvanized incredible support for his candidacy, capitalizing on America’s deep desire to see change in Washington. I especially remember how I hung upon every word of Obama’s presidential acceptance speech, a late-night address before thousands in Chicago and millions who watched on TV across the world.

As an environmentalist, I was particularly inspired by President-elect Obama’s courageous declaration that under his administration “the rise of the oceans [would] begin to slow and our planet [would] begin to heal.” He was, of course, referring to his plan to confront the issues
surrounding global warming. Finally, I thought, an American president who will take seriously the daunting challenges that climate change poses.

Three years into his administration, however, we’ve seen little progress on the president’s promise to help the planet heal. In fact, some of President Obama’s environmental policies have reeked of the retrograde political posturing he campaigned against.

For instance, during President Obama’s three years in office, the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal organization charged with regulating clean water and air standards, as well as monitoring endangered species in the United States, has seen drastic cuts to its budget. Obama’s administration has also failed to implement significant carbon dioxide reduction standards, settling instead for limited initiatives on clean energy. Obama even rescinded his promise to reinstall solar panels on the White House.

Needless to say, eco-minded citizens such as myself have become more than irritated as the promising environmental prospects of Obama’s current term have gone unfulfilled or forgotten.

Yet perhaps it is fortuitous that the question of the construction of the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline will come across President Obama’s desk in the next few weeks. This pipeline, which will make possible the transportation of thick, dirty and corrosive tar from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in Texas, has been called the most important environmental concern of our time. Indeed, NASA climatologist James Hansen says that if all the oil underneath Alberta’s boreal forest is mined and sent 1,700 miles south to Texas for American consumption it is essentially “game over” for our efforts to stem global warming.

It’s hard to believe that the choice to permit the construction of a pipeline such as this one would really be President Obama’s to make. Yet because the Keystone XL requires a license from the State Department to be built, that’s just the case. The tar sands pipeline, which the environmental activist and scholar Bill McKibben has called “a seventeen-hundred-mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the planet,” lives and dies with the stroke of Obama’s pen.

I believe President Obama can use this opportunity to set his environmental policy straight, to fulfill his campaign promises, to right the planetary ship. That’s why on Aug. 20 I voted for him again.

Together with 65 others, I took part in the first day of two weeks of planned nonviolent civil disobedience at the White House against the Keystone XL pipeline. These demonstrations, the largest of their kind in the history of the environmental movement, are not in protest of President Obama and his environmental policies, but rather to get his attention, showing him that he still has support to make the decisions that are best for our planet’s future.

Whereas we voted for the president on a ballot back in 2008, during these past two weeks over 700 people of all ages from across the country have sat-in in front of the White House, effectively voting for Obama again with our bodies. Our hope is that doing so will help to move the body politic.
It’s in the same spirit that so invigorated America in 2008 that we continue to vote for President Obama, in this case ultimately being sent to jail as a result of our efforts to encourage him to live up to his promises. I may have sat down in front of the White House, but I expect the president to stand up in the coming weeks for our planet’s future by saying “no” to the Keystone XL pipeline.

*Russ Powell is a third-year student at the Divinity School.*


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**September 7, 2011**

An Environmental Confession for the High Holidays

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster

Huffington Post

The Jewish month of Elul is the last month in the year and marks the beginning of the season of repentance that culminates with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Ten Days of Repentance, also known as the High Holidays.

The Jewish concept of repentance is called *Teshuvah* ("return" in English) and one of the critical aspects of repentance is the act of confession. In the High Holiday liturgy are numerous public confessions that are couched in general terms for a whole series of sins.

Jews confess primarily in public rather than in private, and in general terms rather than in specifics, because this allows everyone in the community to confess without shame or embarrassment. Public confession also binds the sins of one person to that of the whole community so that all take responsibility for one another. While Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) once wrote that we confess in specific terms only for sins between one person and another, sometimes it is worthwhile to confess publicly for other kinds of sins. If we have sinned against a particular person, we are supposed to go to them, confess and ask forgiveness. If they have died, we are supposed to go with a minyan of ten people and confess over their graves. In all our acts of repentance, we are supposed to try and undo the damage we have caused.

While the traditional list of sins is fairly comprehensive, the time has come to add a new one: the careless destruction of Creation. At a conference for Jewish environmental scholars that I once attended, I heard an environmental educator say that we can become more environmentally aware and responsive by publicly confessing our environmental sins. He then proceeded to do so. Everyone there laughed a nervous laugh of embarrassment, because we all realized, without saying a word, that we all have such sins to confess.

I, too, have committed environmental sins in my life. Here is one that would be more fitting to confess over a river in Northern Ontario (you will soon see why), but because this is the season of repentance, I do it now.
When I was sixteen, as part of my summer camp program, I went on a canoe trip in Northern Ontario and I participated in a frog massacre. I had been going to this camp in Haliburton for nine years, and now I was a CIT (counselor in training). Five of us and a "tripper" (a counselor who specialized in taking out canoe trips) set out in two canoes from the middle of Algonquin Park for a six-day trip that would take us to North Bay.

It was a wonderful trip and we had many adventures. Somewhere along a river about a day east of North Bay, we came across an area that was filled with frogs of many different kinds. One of us hit a frog with a paddle, and then we all went a little mad, completely out of control. We began killing the frogs as we went, and I can't even tell you how many we destroyed. Afterwards, I remember feeling a little ashamed, but we said nothing about it to each other. It was one of those mindless adolescent acts of cruelty that unfortunately seem often to be a part of growing up.

Every once and awhile, I have thought of this thing that I did. I eventually learned that since the 1980's the world frog population has been in sharp decline, probably caused by human created environmental factors such as disease, habitat destruction, toxic pollution and pesticides. This decline is a serious risk to biodiversity. Unfortunately, the causes of this decline are still not properly known even with continuing research. The extinction rate of frogs and other amphibians is anywhere from 211 times the background extinction rate to 25,039-45,474 times. The frog is a kind of environmental canary in the mine, warning us of the overall decline in the earth's ecosystems.

My unwitting part in the frog's decline has been in the back of my mind for some time. Since I believe, that on some level, we must treat all life with the same kind of ethical concern with which we treat each other, I felt that I must confess. (The Jewish tradition believes that one should confess for sins done both knowingly and unknowingly.) To do the frogs justice, according to Maimonides' rules, I should go back to that river and make confession there. Maybe someday I will get the chance to do so but that should not stop me from confessing now.

At a religious environmental conference called "Ground for Hope" at Drew University in 2005 (co-sponsored by Drew and GreenFaith) I participated in creating an interfaith worship service in which I wrote an environmental confession. It begins with a meditation (called a kavanah) which is meant to help the penitent to focus on the particular sin and ends with a traditional declaration done in the style of the main High Holiday confessional called the Al-Chet ("For the Sin of ...") and at the service, although done in English it was chanted in a traditional melody:

Lord, our Creator, we awaken each morning to the dawn chorus of Creation. Our ears hear the birds of the sky singing to the world that they are still alive, our eyes see the flowers of the earth opening to the light of the sun. We smell the scents of the fresh morning air. How many are the things You have made O Lord, the universe is full of Your creations! And yet we ignore these sounds, sights and smells. Instead of the birds' song we hear only the sound of cars and machinery. Instead of the sight of green, brown and gold we see only the gray of concrete. Instead of the fragrance of flowers we smell only the sting of pollution. We experience only the fruits of our own creations. We know only of our own works which too often have wasted Your creation and silenced many of the voices of Your choir. We think we understand the world when
only a fool thinks they can fathom the depths of Your designs. May You give us the strength and
the wisdom to see, smell and listen to Your creation and be moved to protect and cherish the
blessings that You have given us. May we no longer be moved by greed and destruction to waste
Your world for if we destroy it there will be no other. We now know that the destruction of Your
Creation is a sin.

And so for the sin that we have sinned against You by despoiling Your Creation, forgiving God,
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

(From: Rabbi Lawrence Troster & Jane Ellen Nickell, "Cries of Creation, Ground for Hope:
Faith, Justice, and the Earth Interfaith Worship Service," in: Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller,
eds., *Eco-Spirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, [New York: Fordham University
Press, 2007].)

For over 25 years I have been active in the Jewish and interfaith environmental movements. I
have written articles, given speeches and participated in conferences and joined local, national
and international organizations. I have also tried to change the way I live to lessen the impact
that I have on the earth. Perhaps one of the reasons for my involvement in environmentalism has
been an attempt to bring about some kind of healing for what I had done. In Hebrew this is called
a tikkun and is also part of the process of repentance.

Maimonides said that the true measure of one's repentance is found when you are faced with the
same situation and you do not repeat your sin. This is a very high standard when it comes to sins
against creation, since in modern life there are so many things that we do every day that are
detrimental to Creation. Nonetheless, this should not stop us from trying to undo the damage we
have caused to God's creation.

We can begin by confession.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-lawrence-troster/environmental-confession-high-
holidays_b_942086.html

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**September 13, 2011**

Progress Can Make Us More Spiritual, Not Less

By Duane Elgin
Huffington Post

Modern cultures have put great emphasis on measuring "progress" in terms of material growth. Does the understanding of progress change in a world with dwindling supplies of cheap oil, climate disruption, looming shortages of fresh water, massive extinction of plant and animal species and much more? As we run up against the material limits of growth and move into an era
where sustainability is key to our survival as a species, this historically narrow but successful view of progress could hold back realization of a larger vision of human advancement.

The eminent historian Arnold Toynbee invested a lifetime studying the rise and fall of civilizations. In conducting his wide-ranging scholarship, Toynbee found a strong connection between simplicity and human progress. Drawing upon his vast knowledge of human history, he summarized the essence of a civilization's growth in a single law that he called "The Law of Progressive Simplification." He wrote that the progress of a civilization could not be measured accurately by its conquest of land and people. Instead, the true measure of growth lies in a civilization's ability to transfer increasing amounts of energy and attention from the material side of life to the non-material side -- areas such as personal growth, family relationships, communing with nature, cultivating the arts of civilization such as community relationships, theatre, music, citizenship and democracy.

Toynbee invented the word "etherialization" to describe the process whereby, over time, we humans learn to accomplish the same, or even greater, results using progressively less time and energy. "Ephemeralization" is the word that Buckminster Fuller used to describe a similar process of getting greater material output for less time, weight and energy invested.

Material ephemeralization is evident in many areas of our lives. For example, computers have evolved from room-sized giants to slim laptops or even handheld phones with vastly more computing power. Libraries are being transformed from massive buildings that warehouse millions of books to small computer chips that can store -- and intelligently retrieve -- an even greater volume of knowledge. Telephone technology has evolved from a heavy network of telephone poles, wires and transformers to cheap, light and far more powerful cellphone technologies that use transmitting towers and no longer require cumbersome copper wires strung across the landscape. Automobiles have also ephemeralized as they have advanced from heavy works of iron and steel to an increasingly lighter architecture of high-strength plastic, aluminum and exotic materials.

Integrating the historical insights of Toynbee and material insights of Fuller, we can redefine progress as follows:

*Progress is a two-fold process involving the simultaneous refinement of the material and non-material aspects of life.* With ephemeralization, the material side of life grows lighter, stronger and more eco-friendly in production, consumption and recycling. At the same time, the non-material side of life grows in vitality, expressiveness and insight. Ephemeralization involves the co-evolution of inner and outer aspects of life in balance with one another.

The life-cycle of an individual provides a useful analogy. From the time that a person is born until his or her late adolescent years, there is usually a tremendous amount of physical growth. Then, in the late teen years, physical growth stabilizes, and the person continues to develop for the rest of their lives in ways that don't involve growing bigger physically. Likewise, as a species, we can grow in empathy and compassion, in the breadth and depth of intellectual understanding, in creative expressions such as music and poetry and in soulful connection with life. In keeping with Toynbee's "Law of Progressive Simplification," a powerful measure of the progress of civilizations will be the degree to which we shift from a global economy based on
material growth to one that consciously includes non-material development. A growing appreciation of non-material wealth could liberate resources for those in desperate need and contribute to a more peaceful world.

Progressive simplification or ephemeralism is a co-evolutionary approach to living that invites us to continuously balance two aspects of life -- maintaining ourselves (creating a workable existence) and surpassing ourselves (creating a meaningful existence). Philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir helps clarify this when she writes: "Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying." On the one hand, if we seek only to maintain ourselves, then no matter how grand our style of living might be, we are doing little more than "only not dying." On the other hand, if we strive only for a meaningful existence without securing the material foundation that supports our lives, then our physical existence is in jeopardy and the opportunity to surpass ourselves becomes little more than a utopian dream.

Ephemeralism does not turn away from the material side of life; instead, this principle of living calls forth a new partnership where the material and the non-material aspects of life co-evolve and grow in concert with one another. Working together, they can produce ways of living that are materially sustainable, personally rewarding and culturally rich. In place of the failing paradigm of materialism we could choose the promising paradigm of progressive simplification that includes both material sustainability and non-material development.

Duane Elgin is a speaker, author and non-partisan activist for media accountability. He is the author of "Voluntary Simplicity," "The Living Universe," "Promise Ahead," and other books. Please visit his website, www.DuaneElgin.com for free articles and videos on thriving in these challenging times.


September 2011

Clean Earth to Till: An Environmental Vision of Redemption

By Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Jewcology

The concept of Tikkun ʿOlam (the repair or healing of the world) in a contemporary form has been extensively used in Jewish social justice ethics over the last 50 years. In this iteration of Tikkun ʿOlam, there is a high degree of human freewill, instead of divine intervention, as the chief means by which the world will be perfected. But what do Jewish environmentalists imply when they use Tikkun ʿOlam? What kind of Jewish environmental perfection are we seeking? This is an important question because even if we are seeing the repair or perfection of the world as a symbolic and not literal goal, the concept of redemption we choose will shape the way we seek to achieve it.
The secular environment movement has often been criticized for presenting to the world only apocalyptic views of possible future environmental disasters. They have often failed to present a positive vision of what a sustainable world would look like. Environmental historian Steven Pyne once wrote: “The real future of environmentalism is in rehabilitation and restoration. Environmentalists have told the story of the Garden of Eden and the fall from grace over and over again. But we haven’t yet told the story of redemption. Now we need to tell that story.” Religious environmentalists, particularly those from the Abrahamic faiths, have rich traditional sources on redemption that may be drawn upon to create such an environmental vision of redemption.

However, in the Jewish environmental movement there have been few attempts to define our “perfected” world.” Too often, appeals to Tikkun ‘Olam have been vague and are often in conflict with the way the actual workings of Creation. Jewish environmentalism needs a theology of redemption that is concordance with the modern scientific understanding of the natural world. Anything else would require a supernatural ending to the natural world, something modern theology in general and environmental theology in particular has rejected.

The traditional Jewish view of redemption or eschatology has been expressed on three different levels: the individual, the national and the universal. While there are many Jewish visions of redemption, before the modern age all of these concepts assumed that there will come a time when the Jewish people will be restored to their land and living under a Davidic sovereignty; that the individual’s soul will survive death and ultimately be restored to their resurrected body; and that there will a profound change in the course of the world politically as well as in the laws of nature themselves. This will bring about what my teacher Rabbi Neil Gillman has called “The Death of Death.” But the modern sciences of ecology and biology have shown us the necessity of death in the evolution of life and its ongoing dynamic existence.

A new vision of redemption needs to incorporate ‘Tikkun ‘Olam into an ecologically sound concept of Creation. One way to approach this problem is create what might be termed a “minimal” approach to redemption. The minimal approach may be summed by what J.R.R. Tolkien had Gandalf the wizard say about any future battles between good and evil (Yes, I am a very devoted Lord of the Rings fan):

> “Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.” (J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King)

This minimal redemption is very similar to Moses Maimonides’ naturalistic messianism in which natural laws are not abrogated in the days of the Messiah. Human society does improve, but except for the resurrection of the dead, all life goes on as before but in peace, prosperity and harmony. A minimal approach thus seeks no grand vision, no final supernatural end of time, and no radical changes in the natural world. It seeks rather to solve the environmental crisis in a spirit of humility and modesty by the performance of pragmatic acts and policies which will bring about a sustainable world for future generations. This is a great enough task for us all.
We may never see the completion of our quest for a sustainable world but if I could go to my rest knowing that I have left “clean earth to till” for the next generation, then I will be at peace.

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http://www.jewcology.com/content/view/Clean-Earth-to-Till-An-Environmental-Vision-of-Redemption

September 2011

A Pastoral Teaching from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church

Episcopal Church Office of Public Affairs

The Episcopal Church House of Bishops, meeting in Province IX, in Quito, Ecuador, issued the following Pastoral Teaching:

A Pastoral Teaching from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church
Quito, Ecuador

We, your bishops, believe these words of Jeremiah describe these times and call us to repentance as we face the unfolding environmental crisis of the earth:

How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, “He is blind to our ways.” (Jeremiah 12:4)

The mounting urgency of our environmental crisis challenges us at this time to confess “our self-indulgent appetites and ways,” “our waste and pollution of God’s creation,” and “our lack of concern for those who come after us” (Ash Wednesday Liturgy, Book of Common Prayer, p. 268). It also challenges us to amend our lives and to work for environmental justice and for more environmentally sustainable practices.

Christians cannot be indifferent to global warming, pollution, natural resource depletion, species extinctions, and habitat destruction, all of which threaten life on our planet. Because so many of these threats are driven by greed, we must also actively seek to create more compassionate and sustainable economies that support the well-being of all God’s creation.

We are especially called to pay heed to the suffering of the earth. The Anglican Communion Environmental Network calls to mind the dire consequences our environment faces: “We know that . . . we are now demanding more than [the earth] is able to provide. Science confirms what we already know: our human footprint is changing the face of the earth and because we come from the earth, it is changing us too. We are engaged in the process of destroying our very being. If we cannot live in harmony with the earth, we will not live in harmony with one another.” (i)
This is the appointed time for all God’s children to work for the common goal of renewing the earth as a hospitable abode for the flourishing of all life. We are called to speak and act on behalf of God’s good creation.

Looking back to the creation accounts in Genesis, we see God’s creation was “very good,” providing all that humans would need for abundant, peaceful life. In creating the world God’s loving concern extended to the whole of it, not just to humans. And the scope of God’s redemptive love in Christ is equally broad: the Word became incarnate in Christ not just for our sake, but for the salvation of the whole world. In the Book of Revelation we read that God will restore the goodness and completeness of creation in the “new Jerusalem.” Within this new city, God renews and redeems the natural world rather than obliterating it. We now live in that time between God’s creation of this good world and its final redemption: “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-3).

Affirming the biblical witness to God’s abiding and all-encompassing love for creation, we recognize that we cannot separate ourselves as humans from the rest of the created order. The creation story itself presents the interdependence of all God’s creatures in their wonderful diversity and fragility, and in their need of protection from dangers of many kinds. This is why the Church prays regularly for the peace of the whole world, for seasonable weather and an abundance of the fruits of the earth, for a just sharing of resources, and for the safety of all who suffer. This includes our partner creatures: animals, birds, and fish who are being killed or made sick by the long-term effects of deforestation, oil spills, and a host of other ways in which we intentionally and unintentionally destroy or poison their habitat.

One of the most dangerous and daunting challenges we face is global climate change. This is, at least in part, a direct result of our burning of fossil fuels. Such human activities could raise worldwide average temperatures by three to eleven degrees Fahrenheit in this century. Rising average temperatures are already wreaking environmental havoc, and, if unchecked, portend devastating consequences for every aspect of life on earth. The Church has always had as one of its priorities a concern for the poor and the suffering. Therefore, we need not agree on the fundamental causes of human devastation of the environment, or on what standard of living will allow sustainable development, or on the roots of poverty in any particular culture, in order to work to minimize the impact of climate change. It is the poor and the disadvantaged who suffer most from callous environmental irresponsibility. Poverty is both a local and a global reality. A healthy economy depends absolutely on a healthy environment.

The wealthier nations whose industries have exploited the environment, and who are now calling for developing nations to reduce their impact on the environment, seem to have forgotten that those who consume most of the world’s resources also have contributed the most pollution to the world’s rivers and oceans, have stripped the world’s forests of healing trees, have destroyed both numerous species and their habitats, and have added the most poison to the earth’s atmosphere. We cannot avoid the conclusion that our irresponsible industrial production and consumption-driven economy lie at the heart of the current environmental crisis.
Privileged Christians in our present global context need to move from a culture of consumerism to a culture of conservation and sharing. The challenge is to examine one’s own participation in ecologically destructive habits. Our churches must become places where we have honest debates about, and are encouraged to live into, more sustainable ways of living. God calls us to die to old ways of thinking and living and be raised to new life with renewed hearts and minds.

Although many issues divide us as people of faith, unprecedented ecumenical and interfaith cooperation is engaging the concern to protect our planet. And yet, efforts to stop environmental degradation must not be simply imposed from above. Those most affected must have a hand in shaping decisions. For example, we welcome efforts in the United States to involve Native American tribal leaders and to empower local community organizations to address environmental issues. Similar strategies need to be employed in myriad communities in various locales.

Our current environmental challenges call us to ongoing forms of repentance: we must turn ourselves around, and come to think, feel, and act in new ways. Ancient wisdom and spiritual disciplines from our faith offer deep resources to help address this environmental crisis. Time-honored practices of fasting, Sabbath-keeping, and Christ-centered mindfulness bear particular promise for our time.

Fasting disciplines and heals our wayward desires and appetites, calling us to balance our individual needs with God’s will for the whole world. In fasting we recognize that human hungers require more than filling the belly. In God alone are our desires finally fulfilled. Commended in the Book of Common Prayer, fasting is grounded in the practices of Israel, taught by Jesus, and sustained in Christian tradition. The ecological crisis extends and deepens the significance of such fasting as a form of self-denial: those who consume more than their fair share must learn to exercise self-restraint so that the whole community of creation might be sustained.

Sabbath-keeping is rooted in the Book of Genesis, where the seventh day is the day in which God, humans, and the rest of creation are in right relationship. In our broken world, keeping the Sabbath is a way of remembering and anticipating that world for which God created us. Sabbath requires rest, that we might remember our rightful place as God’s creatures in relationship with every other creature of God. Such rest implicitly requires humans to live lightly on the face of the earth, neither to expend energy nor to consume it, not to work for gain alone, but to savor the grace and givenness of creation.

The practice of Christ-centered mindfulness, that is, the habitual recollection of Christ, calls believers to a deepened awareness of the presence of God in their own lives, in other people, and in every aspect of the world around us. Such spiritual perception should make faithful people alert to the harmful effects of our lifestyles, attentive to our carbon footprint and to the dangers of overconsumption. It should make us profoundly aware of the gift of life and less prone to be ecologically irresponsible in our consumption and acquisition.

In assuming with new vigor our teaching office, we, your bishops, commit ourselves to a renewal of these spiritual practices in our own lives, and invite you to join us in this commitment for the good of our souls and the life of the world. Moreover, in order to honor the goodness and
sacredness of God’s creation, we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, commit ourselves and urge every Episcopalian:

- To acknowledge the urgency of the planetary crisis in which we find ourselves, and to repent of any and all acts of greed, overconsumption, and waste that have contributed to it;
- To lift up prayers in personal and public worship for environmental justice, for sustainable development, and for help in restoring right relations both among humankind and between humankind and the rest of creation;
- To take steps in our individual lives, and in community, public policy, business, and other forms of corporate decision-making, to practice environmental stewardship and justice, including (1) a commitment to energy conservation and the use of clean, renewable sources of energy; and (2) efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle, and whenever possible to buy products made from recycled materials;
- To seek to understand and uproot the political, social, and economic causes of environmental destruction and abuse; (ii)
- To advocate for a “fair, ambitious, and binding” climate treaty, and to work toward climate justice through reducing our own carbon footprint and advocating for those most negatively affected by climate change.

May God give us the grace to heed the warnings of Jeremiah and to accept the gracious invitation of the incarnate Word to live, in, with, and through him, a life of grace for the whole world, that thereby all the earth may be restored and humanity filled with hope. Rejoicing in your works, O Lord, send us forth with your Spirit to renew the face of the earth, that the world may once again be filled with your good things: the trees watered abundantly, springs rushing between the hills in verdant valleys, all the earth made fruitful, your manifold creatures, birds, beasts, and humans, all quenching their thirst and receiving their nourishment from you once again in due season (Psalm 104).


(ii) We are indebted to the Episcopal Bishops of New England for their earlier 2003 Pastoral Letter, “To Serve Christ in All Creation.” Several of these “commitments” and other phrases herein are quotations or adaptations of their work.

http://www.stfrancisnm.org/content/pastoral-teaching-house-bishops-episcopal-church

September 18, 2011

Interfaith Conference On Climate Change

All Africa Global Media Date

Indalo Yethu/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX -- The threat of climate change is not just a
scientific concern but a profound ethical challenge that demands leadership from all sectors of society.

Africa and its multitude of vulnerable communities will be amongst those hardest hit by the temperature increases, droughts and severe weather events that climate change is already bringing. Yet the continent has yet to meet the needs of all its people. Poverty, unemployment and rampant overconsumption of scarce natural resources are all consequences of the flawed development model that has caused humankind to change the earth's weather patterns to such an extent that life on earth is now threatened.

Taking hands to meet these challenges, the SA Council of Churches, the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) and environmental agency Indalo Yethu are hosting an interfaith conference from tomorrow, Monday 19 September to Wednesday, 21 September, at Botha's Hill near Durban.

The engagement aims to build public understanding of climate issues and mobilisation for a fair, just and binding agreement at the 17th Conference of Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to be held in Durban, South Africa from 28 November to 9 December 2011.

The interfaith conference will start a process to consult communities on a South African Climate Justice Charter, incorporating Africa's philosophy about the environment and our aspirations for earth keeping.

The over 100 delegates are also set to engage with a declaration adopted by the Southern African faith leaders' conference in Lusaka and the communique on 'Climate Justice for Sustainable Peace in Africa' from a pan-African meeting of faith leaders on climate change in Nairobi earlier this year.

Faith leaders will add their names to the We Have Faith climate justice petition, based on the Nairobi communique, which has already drawn the support of thousands of people across Africa.

The conference will explore opportunities for faith leaders to champion climate change response actions in particular and sustainable development in general. Faith leaders' participation in Indalo Yethu's climate train initiative to spread awareness of climate challenges among the South African public will be discussed. We aim to inspire individual actions by all South Africans to restore the earth for our children.

Delegates will be addressed by officials from various NGOs and government departments, including a briefing on preparations for COP17 by Peter Lukey of the Department of Environment official. Dr Lisa Ramsay of UKZN will update delegates on the current and future effects of climate change on Africa.

Among the participants will be SACC Rev. Mautji Pataki, General Secretary, SAFCEI executive director Bishop Geoff Davies and Indalo Yethu CEO June Josephs-Langa, as well as Sheik Ridwaan Galant of the Muslim Judicial Council.
The conference will run from supper on Monday 19 to lunch on Wednesday 21 September at the Koinonia Conference Centre, Botha's Hill, KwaZulu-Natal.

http://allafrica.com/stories/201109180197.html

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**September 18, 2011**

Warming affects Hindu pilgrimage in Indian Kashmir

By Peerzada Arshad Hamid
Alertnet

PAHALGAM, India (AlertNet) – A very long way from home, Arvin Prasad Goel clutched his wife’s hand as they prepared to eat in a makeshift communal kitchen set up on the Himalayan mountainside.

They were weary from a four-day trek through rough terrain and cold weather to visit the Amarnath cave, perched at an altitude of 12,600 feet (3,880 metres) in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The cave is revered by many Hindus as a shrine of the god Shiva, whom they worship in the form of an ice stalagmite known as the Shiv lingam. Over a 45-day period each year, more than half a million pilgrims make the arduous, 60 km (38 mile) uphill trek to pray before the phallus-shaped formation.

Goel, a 60-year-old resident of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state, has made numerous pilgrimages to Amarnath, and said his faith made the journey possible.

"For our age and health this trek is simply impossible, but it seems Bolay (Lord Shiva) infuses in us the intrinsic power to climb the difficult terrain," he said.

But this year, faith was no match for warmer conditions on the mountain, as the couple found when they finally arrived at the cave.

"To my dismay, the lingam had melted and I could not do the darshan (religious observance),” said Goel. “I couldn’t let my wife see the holy lingam.”

When this year’s pilgrimage began on June 29, the ice stalagmite stood 15 feet (4.6 metres) high, according to the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB), which oversees the pilgrimage.

**EARLY ICE MELT**

But by ten days prior to the end of the pilgrimage period, the stalagmite had completely melted, disappointing thousands of devotees like the Goels.
Shrine Board officials attribute the early melting of the ice to the effects of climate change on the region. In their view, this important cultural practice is at risk from a warming planet.

“The Shiva lingam melted simply because of a warm summer this year,” said R. K. Goyal, chief executive officer of the SASB. "The overall increase in temperature is the reason.”

But Sonam Lotus, head of the Meteorological Department of Srinagar, Kashmir’s summer capital, blamed the melting on the increased numbers of people inside the cave, together with large-scale cooking on gas stoves in open community kitchens nearby.

The wide mouth of the Amarnath cave exposes the ice formation to the outside air, making it sensitive to changes in temperature.

Around 615,000 devotees had completed the pilgrimage by August 3, according to SASB officials, reaching Amarnath on foot and even via helicopter.

“It’s natural that if more than half a million people throng to the cave, the rate of melting of the ice formation will be faster due to human-induced heat,” Lotus said.

“During the first 25 days on average 15,000 to 20,000 people visited the holy cave (each day), and this does have an impact,” he added.

But Lotus did not rule out increasing temperatures around the globe as a factor in the melting of the stalagmite.

“Temperature around the globe has risen considerably, but the abrupt rush of people to the … environment does bring considerable changes,” Lotus explains.

**RISING VISITOR NUMBERS**

Visitor numbers at Amarnath this year were the highest ever recorded, at 635,000 by the end of the pilgrimage period. Previous years have seen about 400,000 people come to the cave. However, unofficial sources put the true number at around one million, since many poorer pilgrims such as sadhus (Hindu holy men) do not register with the pilgrimage board.

Activists have blamed the SASB for violating the recommendations of two government committees that have looked into the pilgrimage in the past. These called for no more than 3,500 pilgrims to be allowed into the cave each day, both to preserve the ice formation and for the safety of visitors. In 1996, at least 243 pilgrims died in bad weather en route to the shrine.

“The shrine board is responsible for playing with the faith of devotees. You have pilgrims coming from distant Indian states and then they are not able to witness the holy thing,” said Riyaz Khan, an activist in Pahalgam.

“Board officials know there is an increase in temperature around the globe, and despite that they allow crowds of pilgrims inside the cave, which contributes to the early melting of the ice formation,” added Khan.
Environmental groups have long accused the SASB of playing havoc with the fragile environment along the route to the cave by encouraging greater numbers of pilgrims.

The groups say that the influx of crowds causes pollution in the mountainous area and puts pressure on nearby glaciers. They want the duration of the pilgrimage to be limited to 15 days each year.

Back in Chandanwari camp, Shanta Goel, who was accompanying her husband on the pilgrimage for the first time, took the ice formation’s premature disappearance personally.

“It seems Bole (Lord Shiva) is annoyed with us,” she said. “The lucky ones had the darshan and we sinners couldn’t.”

Looking ahead, she told her husband that they should be better prepared for the next pilgrimage.

“Make a promise here that next year you will bring me to witness the Shiv lingam in the holy cave at the beginning of the yatra (pilgrimage),” she said.

*Peerzada Arshad Hamid is a writer based in Srinagar, Kashmir.*


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**September 20, 2011**

On the Immorality of Fracking

By Br. Dave Andrews
Sojourners

Illness among people and livestock.

Tainted drinking water.

Explosions and fires.

These are some of the discovered effects of hydraulic fracking -- a growing, and increasingly controversial, method of harnessing natural gas for energy production.

Yet as more policymakers explore the so-called benefits of fracking, vocal opposition to the process is gaining momentum, led, in part, by voices within faith communities.

Fracking involves injecting millions of gallons of pressurized water, chemicals, and sand into the earth to break apart shale in order to release natural gas.
Some chemicals used in fracking are toxic, and accidents and spills can cause them to leak into water supplies. Residents in communities with gas drilling have reported headaches, dizziness, memory loss and gastrointestinal problems, among other ailments.

Some of the chemicals used in the process are known carcinogens and hormone disruptors.

While the long-term effects of fracking have yet to be determined, the technique is now used in 34 states. The federal government is poorly monitoring fracking practices and all too often public health and the environment concerns falls to overburdened, underfunded state agencies.

At least 596 chemicals are used in fracking, but the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not require the natural gas industry to disclose precisely which chemicals it uses. Moreover, the fracking process as a whole is exempt from the Safe Drinking Water Act.

It only takes low concentrations of benzene and diesel fuel -- two compounds commonly used in fracking -- to cause serious health and environmental problems.

Fracking harms livestock as well. The director of the Food Animal Residue Avoidance Databank, a group of animal science professors that tracks chemical contamination in livestock, has reported incidents of veterinarians dealing with animals that have been exposed to fracking byproducts. In Louisiana, for example, 16 cows that drank fluid from a fracked well began bellowing, foaming and bleeding at the mouth before they dropped dead.

The natural gas industry is transforming swathes of rural America into sacrifice zones, while it pockets billions of dollars in profits. One region where fracking is on the rise is the Marcellus Shale gas field, which spreads through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. This area is also home to many farms, meaning that fracking is endangering local economies and food systems.

Farmers in the Marcellus Shale area report that their livelihoods and landscapes are under serious threat from fracking. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture quarantined 28 cattle that had come into contact with fracking waste water that tested positive for concentrations of chlorine, barium, magnesium, potassium and radioactive strontium.

Most religious groups recognize moral principles such as the dignity of the human person, care for creation and an appreciation for the welfare of animals. In all of these areas of concern, fracking presents a dire threat. Click HERE to read a USA Today report on religious groups' opposition to fracking.

Fracking harms communities and it harms Creation. We know little of its long-term effects, but we know enough to challenge the natural gas industry's claims of its supposed benefits.

Increasingly, religious groups are joining the movement against fracking. The Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia have advocated against the process. Earlier this year, America Magazine, the official publication of the Jesuit order the United States, published an editorial criticizing the practice, and parish leaders throughout the nation have held community meetings in their churches about the fracking threat.
Last year, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Union for Reform Judaism, and others asserted that fracking poses a "threat to drinking water resource and is of concern to a growing number of communities."

Given its dangers, the only moral remedy to fracking is to ban the process altogether. Doing so will help preserve human dignity while protecting the environment and animal welfare.

FOR MORE REPORTS ON FRACKING: This summer, WBEZ's This American Life dedicated an entire show to exploring the concerns and questions that surrounded underground drilling in one Pennsylvanian community. Listen to the episode HERE.

Br. Dave Andrews is Senior Representative for Food & Water Watch, where he conducts outreach work to faith communities. He is a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, an international Catholic religious order of men.

http://www.sojo.net/print/blogs/2011/09/20/immorality-fracking

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September 26, 2011

UNEP Pays Tribute to Professor Wangari Maathai

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement and patron of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Billion Tree Campaign, has died in Nairobi. She was 71 years old.

Professor Maathai was one of Africa's foremost environmental campaigners, internationally recognized for her commitment to democracy, human rights and conservation.

She founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, encouraging women in rural Kenya to plant trees in order to improve their livelihoods through better access to clean water, firewood for cooking and other resources. Since then, the Green Belt Movement has planted over 30 million trees in Africa and assisted nearly 900,000 women to establish tree nurseries and plant trees to reverse the effects of deforestation.

"Her departure is untimely and a very great loss to all of us who knew her, as a mother, relative, co-worker, colleague, role model, and heroine or those who admired her determination to make the world a peaceful, healthy and better place for all of us", said the Green Belt Movement in a statement.

In 2004, the Nobel Prize Committee recognized Professor Maathai's lifelong commitment to environmental sustainability and the empowerment of women by awarding her the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the first environmentalist and the first African woman to receive the honour.
In announcing the award, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said that Professor Maathai was "at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa."

Professor Maathai was the inspiration behind UNEP's Billion Tree Campaign, which was launched in 2006. She became a patron of the campaign, inspiring thousands of people across the world to plant trees for the benefit of their communities. To date, over 11 billion trees have been planted as part of the campaign.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "Wangari Maathai was a force of nature. While others deployed their power and life force to damage, degrade and extract short term profit from the environment, she used hers to stand in their way, mobilize communities and to argue for conservation and sustainable development over destruction."

"She was, like the acacias and the Prunus Africana trees Wangari fought so nobly and assiduously to conserve, strong in character and able to survive sometimes the harshest of conditions. She was also immovable in the face of ignorance, political gamesmanship and wanton environmental destruction," he said.

"Indeed she risked her life and limb on several occasions to campaign and coordinate women and young people through her work in the Green Belt Movement taking her messages, her charm, her unflagging humour and optimism, conviction, honesty and intellect from her native Kenya to the highest international debates on climate change to biodiversity loss," continued Mr. Steiner.

"In winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the world caught up with the essence and lifetime understanding of this special person: namely that environmental stability and sustainability will increasingly be crucial for a peaceful world and for over turning poverty, inequality and meeting the rights of women," he added.

"I am pleased that in some of the dark days of her campaigning, when not everyone welcomed her stance and commitment, Wangari was able to turn to UNEP for safety and sanctuary. She returned that support in so many ways by backing and batting for UNEP at home and abroad and by, for example, being a co-patron of our Billion Tree Campaign," said the UNEP Executive Director.

"UNEP has lost a real friend and an icon of the environmental movement. But her work and her vision will live on in the millions upon millions of people - young and old - who heard Wangari's voice, resonated with her aims and ideals and like her rolled up their sleeves to design and define a better future for all," he concluded.

Professor Maathai's unflinching commitment to human rights and democracy led to her appointment as a United Nations Messenger of Peace by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2009.

Testament to her ability to reach communities around the world with her advocacy, Professor Maathai was the recipient of numerous awards from governments and international institutions.
She received France's Légion d'Honneur in 2006, the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights in 2007 and Japan's Order of the Rising Sun in 2009. She received honorary doctorates from several universities.

Born near Nyeri in Kenya's Central Highlands in 1940, Wangari Maathai received her education in Kenya and the USA, from where she earned a Bachelor from Mt. St. Scholastica College and a Masters from the University of Pittsburgh.

She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, obtaining it from the University of Nairobi in 1971.

"I am extremely saddened by the death of a dear sister and a great African. Her work on the environment, expansion of democratic space, the rights of the downtrodden, especially women, and the well-being of the girl-child, will define her legacy.

It is rare for one to find acceptance and recognition at home and abroad, Wangari did that almost effortlessly. Her message was clear. Her conviction, commitment and passion were real and obvious. She was an excellent teacher, a great listener and a wise counselor.

For UNEP, she was an excellent partner who never tired of supporting the organization's ideals and represented it well whenever requested. In short, she believed in what we did. We will truly miss her. She was an exceptional and outstanding woman," said UNEP Deputy Executive Director Amina Mohamed.

In December 2002, Professor Maathai was elected to Kenya's parliament and appointed Assistant Minister for environment and natural resources.

Professor Maathai is survived by her three children, Waweru, Wanjira and Muta, and her granddaughter, Ruth Wangari.


September 26, 2011

Spiritual Environmentalism: Healing Ourselves by Replenishing the Earth

Wangari Maathai: What role does spirituality play in our work to heal the earth?

By Wangari Maathai
Yes! Magazine
Posted: June 3, 2011
Updated: September 26, 2011

Editor's Note: Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan activist and 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, passed away on September 25. In this essay from her book Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual
Values for Healing Ourselves and the World, she describes what motivated her groundbreaking work.

During my more than three decades as an environmentalist and campaigner for democratic rights, people have often asked me whether spirituality, different religious traditions, and the Bible in particular had inspired me, and influenced my activism and the work of the Green Belt Movement (GBM). Did I conceive conservation of the environment and empowerment of ordinary people as a kind of religious vocation? Were there spiritual lessons to be learned and applied to their own environmental efforts, or in their lives as a whole?

When I began this work in 1977, I wasn't motivated by my faith or by religion in general. Instead, I was thinking literally and practically about solving problems on the ground. I wanted to help rural populations, especially women, with the basic needs they described to me during seminars and workshops. They said that they needed clean drinking water, adequate and nutritious food, income, and energy for cooking and heating. So, when I was asked these questions during the early days, I'd answer that I didn't think digging holes and mobilizing communities to protect or restore the trees, forests, watersheds, soil, or habitats for wildlife that surrounded them was spiritual work.

However, I never differentiated between activities that might be called "spiritual" and those that might be termed "secular." After a few years I came to recognize that our efforts weren't only about planting trees, but were also about sowing seeds of a different sort—the ones necessary to give communities the self-confidence and self-knowledge to rediscover their authentic voice and speak out on behalf of their rights (human, environmental, civic, and political). Our task also became to expand what we call "democratic space," in which ordinary citizens could make decisions on their own behalf to benefit themselves, their community, their country, and the environment that sustains them.

In this context, I began to appreciate that there was something that inspired and sustained the GBM and those participating in its activities over the years. Many people from different communities and regions reached out to us because they wanted us to share the approach with others. I came to realize that the work of the GBM was driven by certain intangible values. These values were: love for the environment; a gratitude and respect for Earth's resources; a capacity to empower and better oneself; and a spirit of service and volunteerism. Together, these values encapsulate the intangible, subtle, nonmaterialistic aspects of the GBM as an organization. They enabled us to continue working, even through the difficult times.

Of course, I'm aware that such values are not unique to the Green Belt Movement. They are universal; they can't be touched or seen. We cannot place a monetary value on them: in effect, they are priceless. These values are not contained within certain religious traditions. Neither does one have to profess a faith in a divine being to live by them. However, they do seem to be part of our human nature and I'm convinced that we are better people because we hold them, and that humankind is better off with them than without them. Where these values are ignored, they are replaced by vices such as selfishness, corruption, greed, and exploitation.

Through my experiences and observations, I have come to believe that the physical destruction of the earth extends to us, too. If we live in an environment that's wounded—where the water is
polluted, the air is filled with soot and fumes, the food is contaminated with heavy metals and plastic residues, or the soil is practically dust—it hurts us, chipping away at our health and creating injuries at a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. In degrading the environment, therefore, we degrade ourselves.

The reverse is also true. In the process of helping the earth to heal, we help ourselves. If we see the earth bleeding from the loss of topsoil, biodiversity, or drought and desertification, and if we help reclaim or save what is lost—for instance, through regeneration of degraded forests—the planet will help us in our self-healing and indeed survival. When we can eat healthier, nonadulterated food; when we breathe clean air and drink clean water; when the soil can produce an abundance of vegetables or grains, our own sicknesses and unhealthy lifestyles become healed. The same values we employ in the service of the earth's replenishment work on us, too. We can love ourselves as we love the earth; feel grateful for who we are, even as we are grateful for the earth's bounty; better ourselves, even as we use that self-empowerment to improve the earth; offer service to ourselves, even as we practice volunteerism for the earth.

Human beings have a consciousness by which we can appreciate love, beauty, creativity, and innovation or mourn the lack thereof. To the extent that we can go beyond ourselves and ordinary biological instincts, we can experience what it means to be human and therefore different from other animals. We can appreciate the delicacy of dew or a flower in bloom, water as it runs over the pebbles or the majesty of an elephant, the fragility of the butterfly or a field of wheat or leaves blowing in the wind. Such aesthetic responses are valid in their own right, and as reactions to the natural world they can inspire in us a sense of wonder and beauty that in turn encourages a sense of the divine.

That consciousness acknowledges that while a certain tree, forest, or mountain itself may not be holy, the life-sustaining services it provides—the oxygen we breathe, the water we drink—are what make existence possible, and so deserve our respect and veneration. From this point of view, the environment becomes sacred, because to destroy what is essential to life is to destroy life itself.

Wangari Maathai is a Kenyan activist and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner. She is the founder of the Green Belt Movement, which has trained women throughout Africa to combat deforestation, in part through the planting of more than 40 million trees. She is the author of The Challenge for Africa, Unbowed: A Memoir, The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience, and Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World, from which this piece is excerpted.


September 29, 2011
The following tributes to Wangari Maathai have been published in Pambazuka News (English edition), the authoritative electronic weekly newsletter and platform for social justice in Africa.

WANGARI MAATHAI: RECLAIMING THE EARTH

Horace Campbell

'The best tribute we can pay to this great woman of Africa is to continue to organise so that we can gain higher levels of spiritual awareness and build the shared values for peace and social justice across the planet,' writes Horace Campbell.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76724

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THE TREES WILL CLAP FOR HER

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Nnimmo Bassey

Nigerian environmental activist Nnimmo Bassey remembers the life of Wangari Maathai, the internationally recognised founder of the Green Belt Movement, who died on 25 September.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76698

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COMMITTED TO JUSTICE FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Margaretta wa Gacheru

Wangari Maathai 'achieved more in one short lifetime than most people can even contemplate,' writes Margaretta wa Gacheru, founding 'one of the most important environmental movements in the world' and highlighting 'the capacity of African rural women to problem-solve for the planet'.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76700

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DETERRED BY NOTHING, DISCOURAGED BY NOTHING

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Cyril

Ritchie Cyril Ritchie pays tribute to Wangari Maathai, her 'contagious enthusiasm' and 'calming stoicism', after 36 years of friendship with 'an outstanding woman'.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76701

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A 'GREAT TREE IN HER LIFETIME'

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Shailja Patel

Wangari Maathai's legacies 'are not just for future generations of Kenyans - her influence was global. We have lost her far too early,' writes Shailja Patel.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76737

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'AFRICA HAS LOST A GREAT DAUGHTER'

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Thandika Mkandawire

Wangari Maathai was 'an amazing person', writes Thandika Mkandawire, relating a story about how Maathai defied the Kenyan government's attempt to prevent her from attending a 'subversive conference' in Uganda.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76696

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'WOMEN FOR WHOM NATIONS WILL BE NAMED AND RE-NAMED'

Sokari Ekine

Over the past month, Kenya lost 'two of its most formidable freedom fighters and justice seekers' - feminist and political activist Wambui Otieno and environmental activist Wangari Maathai.
Sokari Ekine looks at reactions to the passing away of these women across the continent, and to the execution of Troy Davis by the US State of Georgia a week ago.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76726

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CELEBRATING PROFESSOR WANGARI MUTA MAATHAI

1940-2011

Odhiambo Orlale

'As we battle climate change, let us remember this remarkable woman who saw in the environmental disasters that engulf us an opportunity for the empowerment of women and the chance to promote peace in the world. We celebrate Maathai for advocating a better Africa and a better world,' writes Odhiambo Orlale.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76735

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MOTHER NATURE MOURNS YOUR LOSS

Tribute to Prof. Wangari Maathai

David Njihia Mwakodi

In the night of death

Our nightingale took her last breath

Hope saw a star shining

Listening love heard the rustle of a wing A golden heart stopped beating And hardworking hands went to rest...

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76728

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REMEMBERING WANGARI

Bayo Akomolafe
'Just before the stars sing, just before the childish wave wanes/You will plant another seed in the distance, another tree, another universe gained.' Bayo Akomolafe remembers Wangari Maathai.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76675

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THE BEST DOCTOR FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940-2011

Philo Ikonya


http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76738

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WANGARI MAATHAI:UNBOWED AND UNBEATEN TILL THE END

My tribute to a feisty and courageous woman

Rasna Warah

Professor Maathai was a celebrated environmentalist, but what was equally remarkable about her was 'her open defiance of outdated, male chauvinistic, neo-colonial and repressive attitudes and traditions' that hindered not just women, but Kenya as a whole, writes Rasna Warah.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76729

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GAY KENYA PAYS TRIBUTE TO PROF. WANGARI MAATHAI

Gay Kenya

Wangari Maathai was 'very passionate about Human Rights' as well as the environment, and was extremely supportive of Gay Kenya in its early days, the organisation recalls.

http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76750

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October 1, 2011

Young People Representing Half the Planet Campaign to Make Rio+20 a Green Economy Hit

United Nations Environment Programme

Social Networking to Mobilizing Communities Spotlighted to Awaken World Leaders to Back a Sustainable Century

UNEP Tunza International Children and Youth Conference

27 September to 1 October 2011

Bandung, Indonesia - While some UN conferences can become over-preoccupied with commas and square brackets, young people from across the globe today underlined their singular and committed preoccupation-action to save and fast track a future for planet Earth.

The delegates, representing all the regions of the world and over 100 countries, were in Bandung, Indonesia, for a unique five-day event that has also put the final touches to children and youth’s requests to governments attending the Rio+20 conference in Brazil next year.

Topping the agenda after almost a week of animated and active debates, panel discussions and cultural exchanges, was how to fast forward a Green Economy.

Many of the participants to the Tunza conference underlined their concern over jobs, but not just any job: jobs that are fulfilling, worthwhile, decent and contribute to an acceleration of sustainable development.

"The trends and science tell us that we cannot wait another generation (until a Rio+40) before we act - the Green Economy is our only future," the young people's Bandung Declaration states.

Young people refer to the Green Economy as "the only integrated framework that is truly sustainable, placing human well-being, social equity and environmental protection on equal footing."
Adeline Tiffanie Suwana, a 14 year-old from Indonesia, said, "As children, we can plant trees, clean rivers and beaches, but we cannot stop industries from polluting our rivers, we cannot force them to adopt green economy. We want policies and laws that will make industries sustainable."

The Bandung Declaration identifies access to green jobs as critical for achieving a sustainable transition to the Green Economy.

It states that, "In the next ten years, as the world's population passes 7 billion, we need to provide jobs for more than 1 billion young people - employment that will both enable them to live productive and worthwhile lives and to contribute to the transition to a just Green Economy."

Daniel Isfer Zardo, a 24-year-old from Curitiba, Brazil - the host country for Rio+20 - said he believed that access to green jobs should be at the heart of the sustainability debate.

"We have to look at our communities, our society, our environment, and realize that we cannot reduce poverty or protect the environment without green job opportunities, especially for young people. This is something that policy makers must consider, if we want the Green Economy to take off," he said.

According to latest estimates, nearly 40 per cent of the world's unemployed, over 80 million people, are between the ages of 15 and 24.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, who attended this week's meetings and debates, said: "Throughout the past week the voices of 1,200 young people have spoken with passion and eloquence here in Bandung. Their positive vision, extraordinary energy and creative solutions must be part of the dialogue on the Road to Rio+20 Conference next year. Representing half of the world's population it is vital that their efforts and inputs are not overlooked."

"Too many of our youth feel a sense of powerlessness and frustration with the 'way things are'. Leaders should listen more carefully and attentively to them and ensure that their willingness to become involved is supported. Not only do young people have ideals, solutions and energy but they are often free from some of the finger pointing, political gamesmanship and vested interests of the past that can hijack a fresh future. The youth gathered in Bandung is the best antidote to a world which continues to rationalize mass unemployment, poverty and environmental destruction in the name of economic progress-and part of the best hope for a transformational Rio+20," he added

The young people state in their Declaration that the Earth Summit of 1992, in which several landmark agreements on climate change to the loss of biodiversity were agreed, was 'transformative'.

But they add that the warning signs that were debated have now become the realities of today and urged governments to move swiftly and decisively towards developing national green economy transition plans.
They also request governments to adopt alternatives to GDP as a measure of wealth—an issue which is now under debate in the run-up to Rio+20 as one of several so-called 'Big Ticket' items.

Specifically, the Bandung Declaration lays out children and youths commitment to the following action plan over the next nine months or so to Rio+20:

- Lobby their governments to make Rio+20 Earth Summit a top priority.

- Adopt more sustainable lifestyles and reduce their ecological footprints.

- Educate their communities and raise awareness about sustainable production and consumption.

- Support the work of young scientists and entrepreneurs that is geared towards Green Economy solutions.

- Contribute to the global, regional and national discussions on sustainable development.

H.E. Professor Gusti Muhammad Hatta, State Minister for the Environment in Indonesia said, "The Bandung Declaration articulates in specific terms the policies and actions that young people of the world believe should be at the heart of the Rio+20 agenda. We are pleased Indonesia played host to this important event, and I hope we succeed in carrying the message of future generations to world leaders."

The Bandung Declaration will be communicated to the Rio+20 Conference by the Government of Indonesia and the United Nations Environment Programme by the deadline for submissions of 1 November 2011.

Notes to Editors:

About the conference

The Tunza International Children and Youth Conference on the Environment is being hosted by UNEP with the support of the several UN entities including ILO, UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, WMO, UNESCO and UN/DESA, as well as international youth organizations like the World Organization of the Scout Movement and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, and private sector partners, such as the Bayer corporation.

About the participants

The children and youth taking part in the conference were selected from 3,000 applicants on the basis of their environmental projects and how active they are on green issues. Participants are divided into two groups: children (10-14 years old) and youth (15-24 years old).

About Tunza

The Tunza Youth Strategy, adopted in 2003 by UNEP's Governing Council, is a long-term strategy to engage young people in environmental activities and in the work of UNEP. The word
'Tunza' means 'to treat with care or affection' in Kiswahili. The Tunza initiative aims to develop activities in the areas of environmental awareness and information exchange on the environment for children and youth. For more information, please visit www.unep.org/Tunza/

The Bandung Declaration can be accessed at the same site.

**About Rio+20**

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 4-6, 2012. For more information, please visit www.uncsd2012.org/

**About the UNEP Green Economy Report**, please visit http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/

UNEP Green Jobs report

http://www.unep.org/labour_environment/features/greenjobs-report.asp

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October 6, 2011

Green Pilgrimage Network launch in Assisi end October 2011

Alliance of Religions and Conservation Press Release

The first global network aimed at greening pilgrimage – the largest movement of people worldwide – will be launched in the presence of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh KG, KT, at the Sacred Land celebration in Assisi, Italy, from October 31 to November 2, 2011. The event is organised by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) in association with WWF.

The Green Pilgrimage Network will help the faiths make their holy cities and sacred sites as environmentally sustainable as possible according to their own theologies and understanding. Pilgrimage is the world’s biggest travel event, with hundreds of millions of people becoming pilgrims every year, whether for a few hours, days or even weeks. The largest human gathering in recorded history was the Maha Kumbh Mela, a festival held every 144 years in Prayag, Allahabad, India, which in 2001 attracted more than 60 million Hindus.

Ten faith traditions have nominated pilgrim cities or sacred sites to become founding members of the Green Pilgrimage Network, ranging as far afield as Louguandai in China for Daoists to St Albans in the UK for Anglicans and Amritsar for the Sikhs. The city authorities of Jerusalem, a major pilgrimage destination for three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – will join the network to green the city for all pilgrims.

Also launched at Sacred Land will be the first Green Hajj Guide aimed at the two million Muslim pilgrims who visit Mecca (Makkah) in Saudi Arabia each year for the Hajj, the biggest annual pilgrimage in the world. Sacred Land will also celebrate 25 years of faith action on the environment since the first Assisi gathering in 1986 when Prince Philip invited faith leaders to consider how their beliefs, practices and teachings could help protect the environment.

That 1986 event, held to celebrate WWF International's 25th anniversary, led to the first statements on the environment by leaders of five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) and launched hundreds of thousands of faith-run environmental projects around the world. So many, in fact, that in 2009 the scale of faith action on the environment was described as “potentially the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history” 2.
ARC Secretary-General Martin Palmer, who organised the first Assisi event for Prince Philip, said: “Today, thanks to that first Assisi event, every major religion takes ecology seriously and is involved in environmental projects, and the world's religions are increasingly recognised as playing a pivotal role in protecting the natural world.”

Martin Palmer added: “The Green Pilgrimage Network will ask the faithful to live, during the most intense of religious experience, in a faith-consistent way. To travel to a holy place in such a way as to treat the whole world as sacred is to be a true pilgrim.”

This year, as it celebrates its Golden Jubilee, WWF will also join ARC and the religious leaders at Assisi, along with representatives from major bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and USAID. Also present will be ICLEI, an international association of local governments on sustainable development, which is supporting the Green Pilgrimage Network.

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Download background on the Road to Assisi

Notes for editors

The Green Pilgrimage Network

1. Faith cities in the Green Pilgrimage Network will include: Amritsar, India, for Sikhs; Assisi, Italy, for Roman Catholics; Etchmiadzin, Armenia, for Armenian Orthodox; Haifa, Israel, for Baha’is; Kano, Nigeria, for Islam’s Qadiriyyah Sufi tradition; Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Muslims; Louguandai, China, for Daoists; St Albans, England, for Anglicans; Trondheim, Norway, for the Lutheran Church of Norway.

Other founder members of The Green Pilgrimage Network include the Church of Scotland whose Pilgrimage Pathway in Luss, Loch Lomond, in the National Trussochs National Park, marks 1,500 years of Christianity; the Coptic Orthodox Church, which will green its St Bishoy Monastery at Wadi El Natroun in Egypt, visited by some 100,000 mainly Coptic Orthodox pilgrims every summer; Jinja Honcho, the Association of Shinto shrines in Japan, responsible for around 80,000 shrines, including many in forests that are the dwelling places of kami deities.

2. At ARC’s Windsor Celebration, in November 2009, UN Assistant Secretary-General Olav Kjørven described faith action on the environment as: “potentially the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history”, and: “the biggest mobilisation of people and communities that we have ever seen on this issue”. At Windsor, nine of the world’s major faiths – Baha’ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism and Sikhism – committed to long-term practical action to save the environment, announcing a huge range of practical initiatives, from the planting of 8.5 million trees in Tanzania to the greening of religious buildings throughout the world. The Green Pilgrimage Network is one of the initiatives to come out of Windsor 2009.
The Assisi Event
The 2011 Assisi event will begin on the evening of Monday October 31 with a dazzling celebration in the 13th century Palazzo Monte Frumentario. Held in the presence of HRH The Prince Philip, the ceremony will bring together music, dance, ritual and teaching from many religions and cultures, illustrating their common sacred mission to care for the natural world with examples of projects worldwide.

Following this inspirational opening, some 90 delegates from around the world, representing all the major faiths, will attend a two-day conference. This gathering will launch the Green Pilgrimage Network, a major new initiative addressing the environmental impact of millions of pilgrims annually making their way to sacred sites, as well as review the achievements of the religion and conservation movement over the last 25 years. Finally the delegates will look at the way forward for religion and environmentalism in the light of their long-term plans and the challenges they face.

Download background on the Road to Assisi

About ARC
ARC was founded by Prince Philip in 1995 to help the world’s major faiths develop environmental programmes based on their own teachings, beliefs and practices, and has been working with the environmental side of sacred sites and pilgrimage routes for many years. In 2006 WWF-International and ARC published a ground-breaking document titled Beyond Belief which explored the role that faith can play in the protection of sacred forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, seas and deserts. For more information, visit www.arcworld.org

WWF
Founded in 1961 as the World Wildlife Fund (now simply called WWF), WWF is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. A global organisation active in over 100 countries, WWF is the world’s leading environmental organisation, addressing global threats to people and nature such as climate change, the peril to endangered species and habitats, and the unsustainable consumption of the world’s natural resources.

Assisi
The ancient and beautiful city of Assisi is highly suitable as a venue to launch the Green Pilgrimage Network. It is the birthplace of the Catholic Saint of Ecology, St Francis (1181-1226) and has been a pilgrimage centre for almost 800 years. It will become one of the founding cities of the Green Pilgrimage Network.

More information
ARC Secretary-General Martin Palmer is available for comment.

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October 6, 2011

UNEP Joins 7 Billion Actions Campaign to Show Opportunities and Challenges at Population Milestone

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - The world population is set to hit 7 billion on 31 October 2011, bringing into sharp focus the challenges of ensuring sustainable development and a fair share of the planet's resources for a growing global population. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has today joined the 7 Billion Actions campaign to encourage individuals, governments, businesses and organisations to take positive actions towards creating a more sustainable world for 7 billion inhabitants.

Co-ordinated by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 7 Billion Actions aims to capitalize on the population milestone by promoting global co-operation on health, environmental sustainability, poverty and inequality, urbanization and other critical issues. Through an interactive website, social networks and mobile phone projects, 7 Billion Actions encourages people and organizations around the world to submit ideas and commit to actions for creating a fairer, more sustainable global society.

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner said: "Whether it's the impact of climate change on food security, or the growing energy needs of a larger, more urbanized global population, meeting the environmental challenges of the 21st Century is vital to achieving sustainable, economic development for 7 billion people."

"Investing in Green Economy solutions - such as renewable energy, green technology or eco-tourism for example - can boost employment, improve livelihoods and make more sustainable use of the planet's finite resources. UNEP is delighted to join 7 Billion Actions, which showcases the need for co-ordinated action by all levels of society, just nine months ahead of the Rio+20 conference, where governments will meet to renew their commitments to meeting precisely these kinds of challenges," added Mr. Steiner.

By using an online tool, or by sending an SMS from their mobile phone, participants in the 7 Billion Actions campaign can submit a snapshot of their daily lives and highlight the development issues that matter to them most. The diverse actions pledged by campaign participants from across the world are then displayed on a visual mosaic on the 7 Billion Actions website.

Other 7 Billion Actions projects include a smartphone application (7 Billion and Me), film competitions, photo exhibitions and a song, United, which can be re-interpreted by web users worldwide and re-submitted to the campaign website.
In the run-up to '7 Billion Day' on 31 October and the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012, UNEP will be participating in the campaign by sharing research, reports and news on the critical role of the environment in a world of 7 billion, via social networks, the media, UNEP's Tunza youth network and NGO partners.

7 Billion Actions aims to build global awareness around seven key issues, including: poverty and inequality; empowerment of women and girls; reproductive health and rights; young people; ageing population; environment and urbanization.

To find out more about 7 Billion Actions, or to create a personal or organizational profile, log on to www.7billionactions.org

For more information, please contact:

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October 17, 2011

Church leaders want action regarding climate change

By Malungelo Booi
Eyewitness News

Church leaders want world leaders to come up with a binding agreement in dealing with the problem of climate change.

Religious leaders launched a campaign called "We have faith - act now for climate justice" on Monday.

The campaign aims to put pressure on the 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which takes place in Durban next month.

The campaign will see a petition signed by millions of people from around the world delivered to world leaders attending the conference at the Durban International Convention Centre.

Church leaders want parties to negotiate in good faith and not prioritise their economic interest at the expense of human kind.

The Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute’s Bishop Jeff Davids said South Africa must be brave and take a lead.
He warned if nothing will be done to deal with the problem of climate change, the human race would continue being at risk.

(Edited by Lindiwe Mlandu)


October 2011

“Water, Water Everywhere and Nor any Drop to Drink”: Praying for Rain at the Right Time and in the Right Amount

Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Jewcology

When I was in Israel for my Junior Year abroad in 1974, I remember that on Erev Sukkot the headline on the Jerusalem Post read: “Sukkot Starts Tonight, Weatherman Predicts No Rain.” For those of us in the Northeast this year Sukkot started with a lot of rain continuing a very wet few months that caused severe flooding in many areas. In Israel, rain at this time of year would very unusual which is why the Mishnah says the following:

All the seven days [of the festival of Sukkot] a man must make the Sukkah his permanent abode and his house his temporary abode. If rain fell, when may one be permitted to leave it? When the porridge would become spoilt. They propounded a parable: to what can this be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master, and he [the master] poured a pitcher over his face. (Mishnah Sukkot 2:9)

Rain during Sukkot is a sign of divine disfavor since God seems to be preventing people from fulfilling a mitzvah. And that is why we only pray for rain on Shemini Atzeret, after we have been able to fulfill the mitzvah of “dwelling” in the sukkah.

Water is a major preoccupation in human civilization and for good reasons. Although water covers over 70 percent of the surface of the earth, clean freshwater is a precious substance, comprising only 3 percent of the total. Without water, life could not exist and the need for and the control of freshwater has been a major matter throughout human history. Today, there is a growing crisis over the access to freshwater as climate change is causing seawater to rise while the rapid increase in world population means that there is a lower per capita amount of available drinking water. There has also been an increase in contaminated water from human effluents, industrial agriculture, power generation, and industrial use. Climate change is also causing changes in weather patterns, which result in extended droughts in some areas of the world while causing floods and the rise of seawater in other parts, which then results in the contamination of agricultural areas (especially river deltas) by seawater; this will help to create a minimum of 250 million climate refugees by 2050. Water will continue to be one of the most important human issues during this century and will also be one of the primary sources of international insecurity.
When we look at water in the Jewish tradition we can see how the vocabulary of biblical Hebrew reflects the ancient Israelites’ concern for water. There are at least ten words for rain in biblical Hebrew, eight words for cloud, and numerous terms for springs, wells, cisterns, and aqueducts. Because there were no major river systems in the eco-regions of the Land of Israel (unlike the neighboring civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt), the Israelites were almost completely dependent on rain for drinking water. The Land needed just the right amount of rain at just the right times for the soil to be fertile enough to grow crops and raise herd animals. But the average rate of rainfall in Israel is extremely variable from region to region. This variability results from the fact that Israel is at the junction of several different ecological domains, each with different amounts of annual rainfall. Anywhere from 16 to 40 inches of rain per year to 4 to 16 inches per year and in the desert areas less than 4 inches of rain per year.

This variability was encoded in the Torah’s view of divine action or Providence (in Hebrew: *Hashgahah*). For example, in Deuteronomy 11:10–17, (which includes what would later become the beginning of the second paragraph of the Sh’ma), the Torah explains the differences between Egypt and the Land of Israel. In Egypt, the rivers provided unlimited water at all times, thus allowing for human independence from any kind of divine constraints. But the Land of Israel is different: it gets its rain from heaven and therefore is under divine scrutiny and control. If the Israelites fulfill their covenant with God, the rain will come in its proper amount. The timing of the rain is also critical to the fertility of the Land. The early rain, called in this passage “yoreh,” comes in October and November and is intermittent and allows the dry hard soil to soften, thus allowing plowing and planting and the later rain to be absorbed. Seventy percent of the rain in the Land of Israel falls between December and February. The final or “late rain” mentioned (Hebrew: *malkosh*) comes in April or early May and is critical for the final stages of the crops’ growth. Fertility of the land is assured and prosperity for the community is granted. If they do not fulfill the covenant, God will “shut up the skies so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce” and drought, sterility and poverty will plague the community. Ecology thus determined theology. The abundance or scarcity of rain is not a random natural occurrence dictated by changes in geography or climate, but a divine response to a human morality. Israel and the Land of Israel are bound together in one moral community under God’s direction.

In the ultimate redemption of the Messianic Age, as portrayed in the Prophets, water will never cease to flow in the Land of Israel and even those parts that are desert will become well watered. The variability of rain will no longer exist and Israel will contain a river (or rivers) as constant as the Nile. In Ezekiel 47, the prophet has a vision in which a great deep river will flow out of the restored Temple eastward down to the Dead Sea, which will become sweet. This river will be full of fish and the Judean desert will blossom with fruit trees and animal life. The redemption of the people and the redemption of the land are completely intertwined.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s great poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a rich tale of a sailor who is cursed for the sin of killing an albatross, a crime of cruelty against a fellow creature. The line which is the title of this post is from a section describing what happens when the ship is becalmed in the Doldrums—a zone of the oceans that encircles the Earth just north of the equator. Within this zone the winds are calm and sometimes are completely absent. The Doldrums are infamous for entrapping sailing ships for days or even weeks without enough wind to power the sails. As a result, many ships run out of water and the sailors suffer immensely because drinking seawater can be more deadly than thirst. This quote shows the great paradox of
water: it is a necessary source of life but only a small amount of it in the world is useable. The sea is full of water but it cannot be drunk. Water can be a source of both life and death, an important idea that is also found in the Bible. And like the ancient mariner, humanity has cruelly ignored the morality of its relationship with Creation. Water is our need, but water can also be our punishment. This week, when we pray on Shemini Atzeret for rain in the Land of Israel, in the right amount and at the right time, let us also pray that this be so for the whole world.


October 19, 2011

Simchat Torah: Remembering Creation One More Time

Rabbi Lawrence Troster
Huffington Post

Simchat Torah is the last celebration of the Jewish High Holiday season. Created in Babylonia during the early middle ages, it is a holiday that marks the end of the yearly cycle of reading the Torah with end of Deuteronomy and then beginning the new cycle of reading with Genesis 1 once more.

The late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, in the last collection of his work that was published in the year that he died, has a wonderful poem about this celebration:

_The Jewish people read Torah aloud to God_
_all year long, a portion a week,
_like Scheherazade who told stories to save her life._
_By the time Simchat Torah rolls around,_
_God forgets and they can begin again._
(From "Open Closed Open," translated by Chana Block & Chan Kronfeld)

In this poem, Amichai reverses the usual rationale for reading the Torah. Jews normally think of the Torah reading as a way to constantly remind them of God's saving acts, the covenant with God and its commandments and the rich stories of our ancestors. In this poem Amichai is saying that the real purpose is to remind God of God's activities in the world as a way of keeping God interested in keeping the Jewish people alive. This is a wonderful and humorous inversion of an important Jewish practice and makes for great poetry if not for logical theology. It is a kind of "sacred parody" that Jews have often used to deal with the disconnect between what should be and what is in the world.

But the Torah reading is really about reminding us, not God, about who we are, where we came from, what we believe and what we should do to change the world. So every year at Simchat Torah we finish reading the book of Deuteronomy and begin again with Genesis.
And I believe that we need to be reminded of Creation even if one might think that spring is the better time. And while Passover in the spring does have its Creation elements, Sukkot was and is primarily a Creation festival, celebrating both the bounty of the fall harvest and need for the winter rains to ensure the fertility of the land. And the fall also reminds us of the cycle of life as much as the spring. Without the ending of fall, the beginning of spring cannot come.

When the fall harvest occurs, our ancestors might forget where it really comes from. After all, when your stomach is full, you might not be thinking of being grateful. As we are warned in Deuteronomy 8:10, 14, 17:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you ... beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God ... and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me."

Now, we in the developed world don't have to really notice what season it is and worry about the harvest. We can always just go to the store and keep things in our refrigerators. Our real reminders are mostly commercial ones: back-to-school sales, Columbus Day sales, Halloween candy, Thanksgiving sales, Christmas catalogues. We have mostly lost a sense of seasons, except perhaps for a change of clothes or moving air conditioning to heating. We are surrounded by the technology of our own power and forget the ultimate Source of that wealth.

So we need be reminded of Creation; the story of Genesis 1 does not have to be read in a literal way to keep its power and impact. It is a story of the emergence of order from chaos and a process of the expression of meaning in the universe. The priestly authors of Genesis 1 saw the number seven as the number of perfection and harmony and embedded it in many ways in the Hebrew text. There are seven days of Creation. There are seven words in the first verse and 14 in the second to cite just a couple of examples. One scholar has suggested that the original context of Genesis 1 was as a piece of liturgy in the Temple in Jerusalem, chanting the appropriate words each day of the week. Within this setting, Genesis 1 is a hymn not only of what was but what should be: a world of perfect harmony and peace.

One of my favorite reminders of the coming of fall is a Japanese maple in our front yard. The leaves turn in the fall from a dark green to a glorious blazing red -- a final burst of light before they fall off and the tree sleeps in the winter.

Like Scheherazade we tell stories to keep ourselves alive -- truly alive to the rhythms of Creation of which we are so intimately part of. So I will celebrate Simchat Torah and hear again the chanting of the Creation, look at our tree and pray that the world will come to be what it should be.


October 2011
The Green Profile of the Grand Mufti of Egypt

By Moshe Terdiman
Green Compass Research

Introduction

Sheikh Ali Gomaa is the Grand Mufti of Egypt since September 2003 and one of the highest ranking and respected religious authorities throughout the Sunni world. He holds the second highest religious position in Egypt, after that of Sheikh al-Azhar. As the Grand Mufti, he oversees the premier institution throughout the Muslim world for religious legal direction, Dar al-Iftaa.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa was born on March 3, 1952 in Bani Suwaif in Upper Egypt. After graduating from college, Sheikh Ali Gomaa enrolled in al-Azhar University. In 1988, he obtained a PhD from the al-Azhar's University's Department of Shari'ah and Law. During the 1990s, Sheikh Ali Gomaa served as a Professor of Juristic Methodologies in the al-Azhar University. In addition, as from the mid-1990s, he reestablished the tradition of giving informal lessons in the al-Azhar Mosque. In these lessons, Sheikh Ali Gomaa succeeded to convert Muslims who used to hold extremist views into Muslims who hold a more moderate Islamic approach. In 1998, Sheikh Ali began delivering the Friday sermon at Cairo's Sultan Hasan Mosque.[1]

Sheikh Ali Gomaa has taken a very clear stance against extremist interpretations of Islam and has become one of the most explicitly anti-extremist clerics in mainstream Sunni Islam. According to him, the use of violence to spread Islam is prohibited and the problem of the radical Muslims is that they have not been educated in genuine centers of Islamic learning. As from the 1990s, he used to go to the prisons and work with radical Muslim prisoners, who denounced violence and embraced the Nonviolence Initiative.[2]

In addition, Sheikh Ali Gomaa is in favor of dialogue and understanding with other religions. He is one of the signatories of A Common Word between Us and You, an open letter dated October 13, 2007, which was written by Islamic scholars to Christian leaders, calling for peace and understanding between the followers of both religions.[3] Moreover, Sheikh Ali Gomaa is a signatory of the Amman Message, which gives a broad foundation for defining Muslim orthodoxy, states that nobody has the right to excommunicate a Muslim, and restricts the issuing of fatwas (religious rulings) to those with the scholarly qualifications to do so.[4] Furthermore, he has publicly asserted that the famous anti-Semitic book, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, is a forgery.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa also issued some controversial fatwas, whose aim is to strive to show the continued relevance of Islam for people living in the 21st century, such as: the permission to sell pork and alcohol in the West; the equal political rights enjoyed by men and women in Islam, including the right to become president of a modern state; and the prohibition of female circumcision.
As part of his progressive and modern thinking and his wish to show the continued relevance of Islam for people living in the 21st century, Sheikh Ali Gomaa made Dar al-Iftaa a modern institution with a fatwa council, systems of checks and balances, a website and a call center, through which people may ask for fatwas even if they cannot come in person to the institution.[5]

Sheikh Ali Gomaa's progressive and modern thinking is also reflected in his statements and fatwas concerning the environment. In this article, I would like to focus on Sheikh Ali Gomaa's environmental ideology and activity.

**Sheikh Ali Gomaa's Green Ideology**

The question of how to utilize religious teachings to solve current environment-related problems has become a priority in Sheikh Ali Gomaa's agenda. He believes that the religious traditions can offer us moral ways and principles for dealing with current environmental issues. In his speech in front of the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne on December 10, 2009, which was titled "the Role of Religion in Preserving the Environment", Sheikh Ali Gomaa said that despite the fact that "in our day we are struggling with a number of issues related to the environment such as climate change, the pollution of the air, oceans, seas, and waterways, and the challenges of feeding a growing global population" and despite the fact that "many of these issues are relatively new so that our forebears did not address them explicitly, our religious traditions do offer us worldviews and principles that aid us in finding solutions to our contemporary problems".[6]

In order to stress this point, Sheikh Ali Gomaa used to cite in his speeches dealing with environmental issues one Qur'anic phrase and one hadith: "Do not sow corruption in the earth after it has been set in order: this is better for you, if you are believers" [7:85]; and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Those who plant a tree and patiently tend to it until it bears fruit will have the reward of giving charity for everything that it produces".[7]

Sheikh Ali Gomaa has been outspoken on environmental sustainability. On November 2, 2009, on his speech at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference at Windsor Castle, Sheikh Ali Gomaa said that "it is a religious duty to safeguard our environment and advocate the importance of preserving it. Pollution and global warming pose an even greater threat than war and the fight to preserve the environment could be the most positive way of bringing humanity together. Environment-related issues ought to be a significant component of educational curricula. It is the duty of all religious scholars to acquaint themselves with the environmental crisis we are facing".[8]

According to Sheikh Ali Gomaa, in order to reach environmental sustainability, Muslims should understand that their role from an Islamic point of view is to be God's vicegerents or deputies on earth. As such, they are responsible to care for and maintain the world while benefiting from what the world has to offer. However, Muslims shouldn't overexploit, use, and abuse the world and its resources for their own purposes since, as Sheikh Ali Gomaa said, "it is a shared right that God has established for all living beings and we do not have the authority to deprive even animals of their rights".[9] In another speech, Sheikh Ali Gomaa elaborated more on this point and said that "according to the Islamic paradigm, human beings are the vice regents of God on
earth and will be judged in the hereafter for their actions and held accountable for the way they handled the environment. Humankind is not free to consume or pollute carelessly. Preserving nature and preventing corruption in earth is one of the core responsibilities of all believers".[10] In fact, Sheikh Ali Gomaa said that if the Muslims take good care of the environment, they will be rewarded with goodness, but if they abuse it and leave it to ruin, they will meet a frightful end as stated in the Qur'an: "those who break their covenant with God after it has been confirmed, who sever the bonds that God has commanded to be joined, who spread corruption on the earth – those are the losers" [2:27].[11]

Thus, according to Sheikh Ali Gomaa, "one of the key characteristics of humankind's role as deputies in the world is balance. We must find a balance between benefiting from the blessings that the world has to offer us, and preserving the order that God has established. We must find a balance between securing our own needs while not depriving others of theirs, whether those others reside in different parts of the world, such as less powerful nations, or in different times, such as our children and grandchildren. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: All of creation are God's dependents, and the most beloved of God's servants to Him are those that are the most beneficial to His dependents. If we take seriously our role as God's deputies on earth, not just by benefiting from the environment, but by preserving it and ensuring that other communities and generations will have the same possibilities to drink clean water, breath fresh air, and live in a world that is in harmony with itself and with ourselves, we may hope to be among those who are beloved to God due to their care for His creation".[12]

In fulfilling their role, Muslims have to collaborate with followers of other religions, because, basically, all humanity shares the responsibility to preserve the world. In his speech at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference at Windsor Castle on November 2, 2009, Sheikh Ali Gomaa stressed this point by saying that "we envision a world that is environmentally safe for our children and the next generations where all nations of all religions live in harmony with nature and enjoy justice and fair share of God's bounties".[13]

From Ideology to Practice

Putting theory into practice, Dar al-Iftaa will be the first establishment in Egypt to be declared carbon-free by the end of 2011.[14] Sheikh Ali Gomaa mentioned this already in his speech at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference at Windsor Castle on November 2, 2009, where he said that "I am also very pleased to share with you that Egypt's Dar Al Iftaa, over which I preside, has started taking practical steps to go carbon neutral in 2010."[15] Furthermore, Dar al-Iftaa organized and participated in international forums and conferences which deal with environmental issues, such as the Alexandria Conference on the Sacredness of Water to the Religions, which brought together Muslims and Christians.[16]

Besides, Dar al-Iftaa and Sheikh Ali Gomaa issue environmental fatwas. For example, in 2007, Sheikh Ali Gomaa issued a fatwa in which he prohibited the farmers from the burning of rice and cotton waste after the harvest. The farmers in the Governorates of Sharqiyyah, Gharbiyyah, Qaliubiyyah, Kafr al-Sheikh, Buhayrah, and Daqahliyyah --the six Governorates with the highest level of rice harvesting in Egypt – have been traditionally used to burn their rice and cotton waste in the fall of every year. The smoke which comes out of this burning together with the vehicle exhaust fumes and industrial pollution add to Cairo's already heavy pollution and as from
1999 result in a dark layer of smog over Cairo which has been known as the "black cloud", especially in the months of October and November. This smog has affected children the most. They tend to suffer from difficulty in breathing, lung diseases, asthma or eye infections.[17]

In order to fight air pollution over Cairo, Dar al-Iftaa issued a fatwa in which it prohibits the farmers to burn rice and cotton waste. The reason is that the burning of rice waste is considered by Sheikh Ali Gomaa as one of the acts that causes harm to the environment and, therefore, is prohibited in Islam. As a justification for this ban, the fatwa cited Prophet Muhammad, who said that "there should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm". The fatwa condemns people involved in the practice and regards them as "causing destruction… without any justification and this is a major sin which the Qur'an forbids". This fatwa concerns also those who wish to burn this waste to exterminate germs or insects in the land, because there are other methods that are less harmful. Dar al-Iftaa also requested government authorities to provide environmentally friendly alternatives to farmers to get rid of rice waste.[18]

As a result of this fatwa, the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs launched in November 2008 an awareness campaign targeting the farmers in the Governorates of Sharqiyyah, Gharbiyyah, Qaliubiyyah, Kafr al-Sheikh, Buhayrah, and Daqahliyyah using SMS and a hotline. Text messages saying that the burning of rice waste is bad for the environment were circulated among the farmers. The Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs also held a number of workshops teaching farmers how to recycle rice waste and safe methods of disposal. It also promoted other usage of rice waste such as animal feed, organic fertilizer and greatly supporting and promoting the industries which rely on the rice waste as a primary source of energy, such as paper production.[19]

Sheikh Ali Gomaa's environmental agenda has not been limited to Egypt alone. He took an active part in Muslim gatherings as well as in multi-religious gatherings, such as the Parliament of World Religions which convened in Melbourne on December 10, 2009 or the Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference which was held at Windsor Castle on November 2, 2009 and gave speeches dealing with the need to preserve the environment.

In these gatherings and conferences he has not spoken only on behalf of himself and his green ideology but has also represented all the Sunni Muslims. For example, in his speech at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference at Windsor Castle on November 2, 2009, Sheikh Ali Gomaa said on behalf of all Muslims that "we envision a world that is environmentally safe for our children and the next generations where all nations of all religions live in harmony with nature and enjoy justice and fair share of God's bounties. We are committed to contribute to the ongoing global efforts dealing with climate change based on the Muslim Seven Year action plan that reflects Islamic principles and values. Muslim Association for Climate Change Action (MACCA) has been founded to be responsible for implementing the plan. The response to this action plan that we launched in Istanbul has been remarkable in a lot of ways and practical steps to execute the plan are underway. Major Islamic cities are to declare the Green status soon, such as Sala in Morocco and al-Madinah in Saudi Arabia". Only at the very end of his speech, Sheikh Ali Gomaa spoke on behalf of himself and said: "I am also very pleased to share with you that Egypt's Dar Al Iftaa, over which I preside, has started taking practical steps to go carbon neutral in 2010."[20]
Together with other Sunni and Shi’ite religious scholars, Sheikh Ali Gomaa supported the Muslim Seven Year Action Plan on Climate Change 2010 - 2017, which was declared in Istanbul following an unprecedented gathering of some 200 key Muslim leaders, scholars, civil society members and government ministries from throughout the Muslim world which was convened on July 6-7, 2009. This action plan proposes establishing institutional enabling framework; developing overall capacity to deal with climate change and environmental conservation; developing and enhancing communication, outreach, and partnerships; activating and reviving implementation of previous initiatives, plans, and declarations; investigating every level of Muslim activity from daily life to annual pilgrimages, from holy cities to the future training of imams; developing the major Muslim cities as green city models for other Islamic urban areas; developing an Islamic label for environmentally friendly goods and services; and creating a best practice environmental guide for Islamic businesses.[21]

Sheikh Ali Gomaa also wrote a book titled "The Environment and Its Protection from an Islamic Point of View", in which he put into paper his green ideology.

**Conclusion**

Sheikh Ali Gomaa has positioned himself at the forefront of the Muslim effort to tackle climate change, which he regards as the most threatening and important challenge facing humanity in the 21st century. He took practical steps so that Dar Al Iftaa, the premier Sunni institution, will be carbon neutral in 2011. He issued a fatwa prohibiting a common custom of Egyptian farmers for the sake of not causing harm to people and the environment. He gave environmental speeches in front of multi-religious gatherings, in which he has spoken in the name of all Muslims. All this makes Sheikh Ali Gomaa a central and leading figure in the Muslim effort to tackle climate change.

There is no doubt that Sheikh Ali Gomaa's thorough Islamic education and knowledge helped him use Islamic texts in order to deal with current environmental problems. But, what has made him better suited to represent the Sunnites and, sometimes, all Muslims in multi-religious gatherings talking about the environment from an Islamic point of view has been his belief in dialogue, understanding and cooperation with followers of other religions.

From this point of view, Sheikh Ali Gomaa has not been only a Muslim environmental influential leader but also a worldwide influential religious environmental leader, who -- through his example, speeches, and ideology -- has inspired many other religious scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to use religious traditions in order to preserve the environment.


October 21, 2011

The Case Against Global-Warming Skepticism

There were good reasons for doubt, until now.

By Richard A. Muller
Wall Street Journal

Are you a global warming skeptic? There are plenty of good reasons why you might be.

As many as 757 stations in the United States recorded net surface-temperature cooling over the past century. Many are concentrated in the southeast, where some people attribute tornadoes and hurricanes to warming.

The temperature-station quality is largely awful. The most important stations in the U.S. are included in the Department of Energy's Historical Climatology Network. A careful survey of these stations by a team led by meteorologist Anthony Watts showed that 70% of these stations have such poor siting that, by the U.S. government's own measure, they result in temperature uncertainties of between two and five degrees Celsius or more. We do not know how much worse are the stations in the developing world.

Using data from all these poor stations, the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates an average global 0.64ºC temperature rise in the past 50 years, "most" of which the IPCC says is due to humans. Yet the margin of error for the stations is at least three times larger than the estimated warming.

We know that cities show anomalous warming, caused by energy use and building materials; asphalt, for instance, absorbs more sunlight than do trees. Tokyo's temperature rose about 2ºC in the last 50 years. Could that rise, and increases in other urban areas, have been unreasonably included in the global estimates? That warming may be real, but it has nothing to do with the greenhouse effect and can't be addressed by carbon dioxide reduction.

Moreover, the three major temperature analysis groups (the U.S.'s NASA and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.K.'s Met Office and Climatic Research Unit) analyze only a small fraction of the available data, primarily from stations that have long records. There's a logic to that practice, but it could lead to selection bias. For instance, older stations were often
built outside of cities but today are surrounded by buildings. These groups today use data from about 2,000 stations, down from roughly 6,000 in 1970, raising even more questions about their selections.

On top of that, stations have moved, instruments have changed and local environments have evolved. Analysis groups try to compensate for all this by homogenizing the data, though there are plenty of arguments to be had over how best to homogenize long-running data taken from around the world in varying conditions. These adjustments often result in corrections of several tenths of one degree Celsius, significant fractions of the warming attributed to humans.

And that's just the surface-temperature record. What about the rest? The number of named hurricanes has been on the rise for years, but that's in part a result of better detection technologies (satellites and buoys) that find storms in remote regions. The number of hurricanes hitting the U.S., even more intense Category 4 and 5 storms, has been gradually decreasing since 1850. The number of detected tornadoes has been increasing, possibly because radar technology has improved, but the number that touch down and cause damage has been decreasing. Meanwhile, the short-term variability in U.S. surface temperatures has been decreasing since 1800, suggesting a more stable climate.

Without good answers to all these complaints, global-warming skepticism seems sensible. But now let me explain why you should not be a skeptic, at least not any longer.

Over the last two years, the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Project has looked deeply at all the issues raised above. I chaired our group, which just submitted four detailed papers on our results to peer-reviewed journals. We have now posted these papers online at www.BerkeleyEarth.org to solicit even more scrutiny.

Our work covers only land temperature—not the oceans—but that's where warming appears to be the greatest. Robert Rohde, our chief scientist, obtained more than 1.6 billion measurements from more than 39,000 temperature stations around the world. Many of the records were short in duration, and to use them Mr. Rohde and a team of esteemed scientists and statisticians developed a new analytical approach that let us incorporate fragments of records. By using data from virtually all the available stations, we avoided data-selection bias. Rather than try to correct for the discontinuities in the records, we simply sliced the records where the data cut off, thereby creating two records from one.

We discovered that about one-third of the world's temperature stations have recorded cooling temperatures, and about two-thirds have recorded warming. The two-to-one ratio reflects global warming. The changes at the locations that showed warming were typically between 1-2ºC, much greater than the IPCC's average of 0.64ºC.

To study urban-heating bias in temperature records, we used satellite determinations that subdivided the world into urban and rural areas. We then conducted a temperature analysis based solely on "very rural" locations, distant from urban ones. The result showed a temperature increase similar to that found by other groups. Only 0.5% of the globe is urbanized, so it makes sense that even a 2ºC rise in urban regions would contribute negligibly to the global average.
What about poor station quality? Again, our statistical methods allowed us to analyze the U.S. temperature record separately for stations with good or acceptable rankings, and those with poor rankings (the U.S. is the only place in the world that ranks its temperature stations). Remarkably, the poorly ranked stations showed no greater temperature increases than the better ones. The mostly likely explanation is that while low-quality stations may give incorrect absolute temperatures, they still accurately track temperature changes.

When we began our study, we felt that skeptics had raised legitimate issues, and we didn't know what we'd find. Our results turned out to be close to those published by prior groups. We think that means that those groups had truly been very careful in their work, despite their inability to convince some skeptics of that. They managed to avoid bias in their data selection, homogenization and other corrections.

Global warming is real. Perhaps our results will help cool this portion of the climate debate. How much of the warming is due to humans and what will be the likely effects? We made no independent assessment of that.

Mr. Muller is a professor of physics at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of "Physics for Future Presidents" (W.W. Norton & Co., 2008).

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204422404576594872796327348.html

October 22, 2011

Climate change: The heat is on

A new analysis of the temperature record leaves little room for the doubters. The world is warming

The Economist

FOR those who question whether global warming is really happening, it is necessary to believe that the instrumental temperature record is wrong. That is a bit easier than you might think.

There are three compilations of mean global temperatures, each one based on readings from thousands of thermometers, kept in weather stations and aboard ships, going back over 150 years. Two are American, provided by NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), one is a collaboration between Britain’s Met Office and the University of East Anglia’s Climate Research Unit (known as Hadley CRU). And all suggest a similar pattern of warming: amounting to about 0.9°C over land in the past half century.

To most scientists, that is consistent with the manifold other indicators of warming—rising sea-levels, melting glaciers, warmer ocean depths and so forth—and convincing. Yet the consistency among the three compilations masks large uncertainties in the raw data on which they are based. Hence the doubts, husbanded by many eager sceptics, about their accuracy. A new study, however, provides further evidence that the numbers are probably about right.
The uncertainty arises mainly because weather stations were never intended to provide a climatic record. The temperature series they give tend therefore to be patchy and even where the stations are relatively abundant, as in western Europe and America, they often contain inconsistencies. They may have gaps, or readings taken at different times of day, or with different kinds of thermometer. The local environment may have changed. Extrapolating a global average from such data involves an amount of tinkering—or homogenisation.

It might involve omitting especially awkward readings; or where, for example, a heat source like an airport has sprung up alongside a weather station, inputting a lower temperature than the data show. As such cases are mostly in the earlier portions of the records, this will exaggerate the long-term warming trend. That is at best imperfect. And for those—including Rick Perry, the Republican governor of Texas and would-be president—who claim to see global warming as a hoax by grant-hungry scientists, it may look like a smoking gun.

To build confidence in their methodologies, NASA and NOAA already publish their data and algorithms. Hadley CRU is now doing so. A grander solution, outlined in a forthcoming Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, would be to provide a single online databank of all temperature data and analysis. Part of the point would be to encourage more scientists and statisticians to test the existing analyses—and a group backed by Novim, a research outfit in Santa Barbara, California, has recently done just that.

### Inconvenient data

Marshalled by an astrophysicist, Richard Muller, this group, which calls itself the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature, is notable in several ways. When embarking on the project 18 months ago, its members (including Saul Perlmutter, who won the Nobel prize for physics this month for his work on dark energy) were mostly new to climate science. And Dr Muller, for one, was mildly sceptical of its findings. This was partly, he says, because of “climategate”: the 2009 revelation of e-mails from scientists at CRU which suggested they had sometimes taken steps to disguise their adjustments of inconvenient palaeo-data. With this reputation, the Berkeley Earth team found it unusually easy to attract sponsors, including a donation of $150,000 from the Koch Foundation.

Yet Berkeley Earth’s results, as described in four papers currently undergoing peer review, but which were nonetheless released on October 20th, offer strong support to the existing temperature compilations. The group estimates that over the past 50 years the land surface warmed by 0.911°C: a mere 2% less than NOAA’s estimate. That is despite its use of a novel methodology—designed, at least in part, to address the concerns of what Dr Muller terms “legitimate sceptics”.

Most important, Berkeley Earth sought an alternative way to deal with awkward data. Its algorithm attaches an automatic weighting to every data point, according to its consistency with comparable readings. That should allow for the inclusion of outlandish readings without distorting the result. (Except where there seems to be straightforward confusion between Celsius and Fahrenheit, which is corrected.) By avoiding traditional procedures that require long, continuous data segments, the Berkeley Earth methodology can also accommodate unusually short sequences: for example, those provided by temporary weather stations. This is another
innovation that allows it to work with both more and less data than the existing compilations, with varying degrees of certainty. It is therefore able to compile an earlier record than its predecessors, starting from 1800. (As there were only two weather stations in America, a handful in Europe and one in Asia for some of that time, it has a high degree of uncertainty.) To test the new technique, however, much of the analysis uses the same data as NOAA and NASA.

**Heat maps**

In another apparent innovation, the Berkeley team has written into its analysis a geospatial technique, known as kriging, which uses the basic spatial correlations in weather to estimate the temperature at points between weather stations. This promises to provide a more nuanced heat map than presented in the existing compilations, which either consign an average temperature to an area defined by a grid square or, in the case of NASA, attempt a less ambitious interpolation.

It will be interesting to see whether this makes it past the review process. Peter Thorne, a climatologist at the Co-operative Institute for Climate and Satellites, in North Carolina, describes it as “quite a hard sell in periods that are data sparse”. He adds: “That doesn’t mean you can’t do it. It means you’ve got to prove it works.”

Two of the Berkeley Earth papers address narrower concerns. One is the poor location of many weather stations. A crowd-sourcing campaign by a meteorologist and blogger, Anthony Watts, established that most of America’s stations are close enough to asphalt, buildings or other heat sources to give artificially high readings. The other is the additional warming seen in built-up areas, known as the “urban heat-island effect”. Many sceptics fear that, because roughly half of all weather stations are in built-up areas, this may have inflated estimates of a temperature rise.

The Berkeley Earth papers suggest their analysis is able to accommodate these biases. That is a notable, though not original, achievement. Previous peer-reviewed studies—including one on the location of weather stations co-authored by Mr Watts—have suggested the mean surface temperatures provided by NOAA, NASA and Hadley CRU are also not significantly affected by them.

Yet the Berkeley Earth study promises to be valuable. It is due to be published online with a vast trove of supporting data, merged from 15 separate sources, with duplications and other errors clearly signalled. At a time of exaggerated doubts about the instrumental temperature record, this should help promulgate its main conclusion: that the existing mean estimates are in the right ballpark. That means the world is warming fast.


**October 24, 2011**

Climate-change skeptic: ‘You should not be a skeptic.’

By Jay Bookman

AJC
Richard Muller, a physics professor at Cal-Berkeley, has been a celebrated skeptic about the true extent of climate change.

Muller has questioned whether the data had been skewed by the “heat-island effect.” He has had his doubts about the so-called “hockey stick,” which shows global temperatures rising much faster since the early 19th century than at any point in the last thousand years. In the past, he has called the hockey stick “an incredible error” and “the artifact of poor mathematics.” And he has been quite harsh in his condemnation of fellow scientists involved in the so-called ClimateGate scandal:

“I frankly as a scientist — I now have a list of people whose papers I’m won’t read anymore. You’re not allowed to do this in science. This is not up to our standards.”

So Muller, acting in the best traditions of science, decided to redo that work. He put together a top-notch team that included Saul Perlmutter, who just recently won the Nobel Prize in physics, and Judith Curry of Georgia Tech, another noted scientist who has been critical of some of the work of some of her peers. Their project — funded in part by a grant from the Charles M. Koch Foundation — just completed its two-year work.

Last week, Muller and the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature team released its findings (the results have yet to undergo peer review). As Muller described it:

Our biggest surprise was that the new results agreed so closely with the warming values published previously by other teams in the US and the UK. This confirms that these studies were done carefully and that potential biases identified by climate change skeptics did not seriously affect their conclusions.

As he wrote in the Wall Street Journal:

“When we began our study, we felt that skeptics had raised legitimate issues, and we didn’t know what we’d find. Our results turned out to be close to those published by prior groups. We think that means that those groups had truly been very careful in their work, despite their inability to convince some skeptics of that. They managed to avoid bias in their data selection, homogenization and other corrections.”

Here’s a chart produced by Muller’s team, documenting the findings of three other research teams as well as the BEST team. Note how closely the findings track each other.

This is how science works. It checks upon itself. And when the position that you had previously taken has been proved false, you do what Muller has done:

You change your position.

Sacred natural sites raise interest of scientists in Zurich

SacredNaturalSites.org

Sacred natural sites can be mysterious and intriguing places. How comes sacred forest groves have been maintained in India throughout times of modern day development? What social mechanisms lay at the basis of the customary governance of sacred lakes of the Niger Delta? Is the biodiversity preserved in sacred natural sites a by-product or an intentional result of religious practice? All these questions aroused the curiosity of dedicated scientists from all over Europe who gathered for a one day symposium in Zurich on October the 25th.

The symposium was organised by Claudia Rutte who has studied sacred natural sites since 2006 and started a database allowing the structural and meta-analysis of peer review academic journal articles. In doing so she inspired many scientists around her and also connected with those who were already working on the subject in other universities around Europe.

The database has been developed to do scientific research on sacred natural sites but according to Shonil Bhagwat from Oxford University it also allows the mapping of sacred natural sites. In his guest lecture Shonil suggested that the mapping of sacred natural sites around the world would help prevent unintended damage to them and it might also be a useful tool to support policy makers.

The struggle for the protection of sacred natural site has since long been intertwined with that of the international indigenous rights movement which is pitted against resource capture and inequitable policies. Recent incursions of extractive industries in world Heritage Sites testify of their increasing influence on global economic powers. Economists often say that one cannot manage what they cannot measure, but how do we measure the true values of a sacred natural site and who eventually makes decisions over those places?

Some of those questions had already been subject to the research of some of the participants at the symposium. “I combine theories and concepts of institutional economics with resilience thinking to explain adaptation or persistence in the governance of sacred natural sites” said Katrin Daedlow, research assistant and PhD candidate Humboldt-University in Berlin. Like Kathrin several scientists had shown to be struggling with a conceptual scientific framework for their studies others took an approach that directly supported practical conservation activities.

Estonian sacred sites had not only been studied and documented, their day to day management is also supported through the work of IUCN and UNESCO. Their Guidelines on sacred natural sites for protected area managers are have been translated into Estonian and are in the processes of being endorsed and implemented by the national and regional governments. Training workshops are being scheduled and a national register of sacred natural sites is expected to grow over the coming years.

Bas Verschuuren of the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative and Co-Chair to the IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values stressed the need for research to be applied and
meaningful to the custodians of sacred natural sites. “With the help of scientists we can achieve a lot but we must seek guidance from custodians and we must not forget that many sacred natural sites embody not only the spiritual but also the scientific traditions of many different cultures around the world”. Scientists must be humble and learn from those indigenous sciences and worldviews in order to truly do inter-disciplinary research.

The study of sacred natural sites is coming into swing as some of the participants noted. It will be a hot issue that will attract funding from donors looking to support sympathetic spaces in research institutions and conservation agencies. Who is going to broker the interests between the custodians of sacred natural sites and scientists? How will these endeavours effectively contribute to the protection, conservation and revitalisation of sacred natural sites? These questions where burning on everyone’s mind and although they were largely left unanswered it is hoped that they will remain as a guidance to scientists interested in sacred natural sites.


October 28, 2011

Climate change is at its root a spiritual crisis
World Council of Churches

Member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Canada join hands with faith leaders, politicians and civil society actors to stress a “moral responsibility to address global warming”, which they call “a spiritual crisis”. Together they prepared a “Canadian Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change” on the occasion of the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2011 (COP 17).

Leading up to the events of COP 17 in Durban, South Africa from 28 November to 9 December 2011, this is one of the first times when a broad interfaith effort to write a common letter from faith leaders in Canada. These deliberations were undertaken at an event organized by the Commission on Justice and Peace of the Canadian Council of Churches from 23-24 October in Ottawa.

The Canadian Council of Churches represents around 23 denominations from the Anglican, Evangelical, Catholic, Reformed, Free Church, and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions, making up about 85% of the Christians in Canada.

Participants from diverse faith perspectives joined their voices with the interfaith signatories of this document in addressing the larger context of the United Nations:

“As you carry out your responsibilities at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate (COP 17), we urge you to honour the values and adopt the policy goals we have described… [because] we believe these to be practical and critical measures necessary to secure the well-being of the planet for future generations of life.”

The WCC programme executives on climate change, Dr Guillermo Kerber praises these initiatives by the churches in Canada. He says, “WCC member churches have joined other
religious organizations highlighting the spiritual implications of the consequences of climate change. We are listening to the calls coming from churches who are suffering already the consequences of climate change, as recently in Tuvalu.”

Kerber considers these efforts from the religious leaders as attempts to create a positive impact at the COP 17 conference in Durban.

“As we approach COP 17, statements like the one produced by Canadian churches can help show the concerns of faith communities. In Durban an interfaith rally and celebration is being organized by the ecumenical and religious actors. The WCC will be offering a side event at the official venue on 7 December together with Caritas International and Religions for Peace, addressing religious implications of climate change,” says Kerber.

Read also:

Canadian Council of Churches press release: Can faith communities change the climate?

WCC News: Raising ethical dimensions in debate on climate justice

WCC programme on climate change and eco-justice


November 1, 2011

New UNEP Report Tracks the Changing Global Environment over the Past Two Decades

United Nations Environment Programme

Nairobi - The environmental changes that have swept the planet over the last twenty years are spotlighted in a new compilation of statistical data by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), released today in a report entitled "Keeping Track of our Changing Environment: From Rio to Rio+20".

The report is produced as part of UNEP's "Global Environmental Outlook-5" (GEO -5) series, the UN's most authoritative assessment of the state, trends and outlook of the global environment. The full GEO-5 report will be launched next May, one month ahead of the Rio+20 Conference taking place in Brazil.

UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner, said, "Today marks the deadline for governments, business and civil society to submit their submissions for how Rio+20 can deliver a transformational outcome in terms of accelerating and scaling-up sustainable development for now seven billion people".
"The indicator report gets us all back to basics, underlining the rapid buildup of greenhouse gases to the erosion of biodiversity and the 40 per cent increase in the use of natural resources—faster than global population growth. But the report also underlines how, when the world decides to act it can dramatically alter the trajectory of hazardous trends that threaten human well-being—action to phase-out ozone damaging chemicals being a spirited and powerful example," he added.

"Rio+20, under the two themes of a Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and an institutional framework for sustainable development, can with the requisite level of leadership trigger the necessary switches that may ensure that the balance of negative versus positive trends moves from the red into the black and that the Right to Development is enjoyed by the many rather than the few," said Mr. Steiner.

Through data, graphics and satellite images, the UNEP report offers wide-ranging information on a number of key issues:

**On population**

- As the world's population reaches 7 billion, urban population has grown by 45 per cent since 1992.

- Yet the percentage of slum dwellers has dropped from 46 per cent in 1990 to a third in 2010, thanks to improved housing and sanitation.

- The number of megacities with at least 10 million people has grown from 10 in 1992 to 21 last year - a 110 per cent increase.

- 1.4 billion people globally have no access to reliable electricity or the power grid.

**Climate change**

- Global CO2 emissions continue to rise due to increasing use of fossil fuels, with 80 per cent of global emissions coming from just 19 countries.

- The amount of CO2 per US$1 GDP has dropped by 23 per cent since 1992 underlining that some decoupling of economic growth from resource use is occurring.

- Nearly all mountain glaciers around the world are retreating and getting thinner, with severe impacts on the environment and human well-being.

- Diminishing glaciers not only influence current sea-level rise, but also threaten the well-being of approximately one-sixth of the world's population.

- Sea levels have been rising at an average rate of about 2.5 mm per year since 1992.

**Energy**
Tracking energy trends since 1992, the report indicates that the contribution of renewable energy (including biomass) to the global energy supply stood at an estimated 16% in 2010.

Solar and wind energy accounted for only 0.3% of the total global energy. Increased recognition of the need to move towards low carbon, resource efficient energy solutions can be seen in the 540% increase in investments in sustainable energy between 2004 and 2010.

Due to the decreasing prices of the technologies and adoption of new policies, growth in biodiesel as a renewable energy source has jumped 300,000 per cent, use of solar energy has increased by nearly 30,000 per cent, wind by 6,000 per cent and biofuels by 3,500 per cent.

**Resource Efficiency**

The global use of natural resources rose by over 40 per cent from 1992 to 2005. The report warns that unless concerted and rapid action is taken to curb and decouple resource depletion from economic growth, human activities may destroy the very environment that supports economies and sustains life.

**Forests**

Despite the net reforestation now seen in Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, ongoing forest loss in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean means that global forest area has decreased by 300 million hectares since 1990.

The annual 20 per cent rise in the number of forests receiving certificates for sustainable forestry practices shows that consumers are exerting influence on timber production. However, only around 10 per cent of global forests are under certified sustainable management.

A growing percentage of the world's forests are one that have been replanted—an area equaling the size of a country like Tanzania.

**Food Security and land use**

Food production has risen by 45% since 1992. These increased yields are heavily reliant on the use of fertilizers, which as well as enriching soil fertility, can also have a negative impact on the environment, such algal blooms in inland and marine waters.

Land used for organic farming is growing at an annual rate of 13 per cent.

**Drinking Water**

The world will meet, or even exceed, the Millennium Development Goals target on access to drinking water; indicating that by 2015 nearly 90 per cent of the population in developing regions will have access to improved sources of drinking water, up from 77 per cent in 1990.

The data compiled also indicates that environmental target-setting works best for well-defined issues such as phasing out leaded gasoline or ozone-depleting substances.
The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, for example, used mandatory targets to phase-out the pollutants that were damaging the planet's protective shield.

Over 90 per cent of all ozone-depleting substances under the treaty were phased out between 1992 and 2009. Similarly, only a small number of countries still use leaded gasoline and they are expected to make the switch over the next year or two.

**Other facts and figures from the report include:**

. 13 per cent of the world's land surface, 7 per cent of its coastal waters and 1.4 percent of its oceans are protected.

. There is a growing concern that the oceans are becoming more acidic. This could have significant consequences on marine organisms which may alter species composition, disrupt marine food webs and potentially damage fishing, tourism activities.

. The ocean's pH declined from 8.11 in 1992 to 8.06 in 2007.

. The number of tanker oil spills recorded has declined in 20 years.

. Biodiversity has declined by 12 per cent at the global level and by 30 per cent in the tropics.

. Eco-tourism is growing at a rate three times faster than traditional mass-tourism.

. Plastics production has climbed by 130 per cent.

The UNEP publication also notes that many environmental issues, which were only emerging in 1992, are now firmly part of mainstream policymaking in many countries.

**Some examples include:**

. New Multilateral Environmental Agreements and Conventions which have been established or entered into force to address emerging global environmental issues.

. The greening of economy has taken off as a viable pathway of low-carbon, climate resilient and resource efficient economic development.

. Carbon Trading has put a monetary value on Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

. Recycling, or processing waste into new resources, is becoming policy and practice in many countries.

. Commercialization of renewable energy, with biofuels, solar and wind energy production growing.

. Chemicals Management has led to the banning of a number of deadly chemicals.
Organic Products and eco-labeling are growing thanks to consumer demand.

Nanotechnology is growing, especially in the fields of energy, health care, clean water and climate change.

The authors of the report point out that the lack of sufficient, solid data and monitoring systems to measure progress remains an obstacles to achieving the environmental goals set by the international community. The report highlights the missing pieces in our knowledge about the state of the environment, calling for global efforts to collect scientifically-credible data for environmental monitoring.

The Eye on Earth Summit, to be held in Abu Dhabi next month, presents one such opportunity, where scientists, policymakers and governments will work together to define the key challenges and solutions related to environmental data access and sharing.

**Notes to the Editors:**

**Rio Earth Summit:** In 1992 the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, popularly known as the Rio Earth Summit, was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to address the state of the environment and sustainable development. The meeting yielded several important agreements, including 'Agenda 21', a plan of action adopted by over 178 governments to address human impacts on the environment at local, national and global levels, as well as key treaties on climate change, desertification and biodiversity. In June 2012 will be the follow up meeting or Rio+20 in Brazil.

**Keeping Track of our changing environment** can be found on the GEO-5 website: http://www.unep.org/GEO/pdfs/Keeping_Track.pdf

**Eye on Earth Summit (Abu Dhabi / 12-15 December 2011):** Facilitated by Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI) and hosted by Abu Dhabi Environment Agency (EAD) in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Eye on Earth Summit will strengthen existing efforts for unified, global solutions to the issues that preclude access to data and information on the environment. More at: http://www.eyeonearthsummit.org/

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**November 3, 2011**

Dr. Muller’s Findings
Richard Muller, a prominent American physicist, was so skeptical about data showing a gradual warming of the Earth’s surface that he decided to investigate for himself. The results of his two-year inquiry — partially bankrolled by the Charles Koch Foundation, whose founder is a prominent global-warming denier — are now in. And, voilà, the Earth is indeed warming, just as most scientists have been saying for years.

The main finding by Mr. Muller and his team at the University of California at Berkeley is that land temperatures have risen about 1 degree Celsius (or 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) since 1950. This matches findings by the National Academy of Sciences, federal agencies and independent American and British researchers whose work has been repeatedly attacked by climate deniers and opponents of efforts to limit emissions of greenhouse gases.

Mr. Muller undertook the study partly because he distrusted the readings at temperature stations around the world, some of which he felt were more sophisticated than others, and partly because he feared that higher temperatures in the cities skewed the overall result. After taking 1.6 billion readings at 39,000 sites, he has totaled up the results and declared: “Global warming is real.”

This may not be exactly the result the Koch foundation had in mind when it forked out one-quarter of the $600,000 it took to do the study. Charles Koch and his brother, David, are oil and gas billionaires who argue that warming is a hoax. They spent heavily to defeat California’s global warming initiative in a 2010 state referendum. Still, we should thank them for helping to change the mind of an influential scientist.

Mr. Muller says he doesn’t know how much of the warming is caused by humans, what its effects will be or what should be done about it. He shows little interest in entering the political fight. Still, his acceptance of the reality of warming may help move the conversation — once and for all — away from questions about whether it exists to smart strategies for addressing it.

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November 3, 2011

Richard Muller, Climate Researcher, Navigates The Volatile Line Between Science And Skepticism

By Tom Zeller, Jr.
Huffington Post

Though by no means a climate change denier, Richard Muller, a physicist at the University of California, Berkeley, whose work in nuclear and astrophysics is well known, had long been suspicious of some of the science underpinning the accepted catechism on global warming.

He wondered, for example, about the the potential for urban areas, which retain and generate inordinate amounts of heat, to distort data suggesting that things were getting warmer. He also
questioned the reliability of surface temperature readings collected from aging and error-prone monitoring stations all over the planet.

Muller's desire to examine these issues -- along with a willingness to **excoriate prominent climate scientists for what he considered bad behavior**, and to **cheer climate change skeptics** for bucking received orthodoxies on the topic -- certainly made him something of an orphan in the ever-polarized climate wars. But to his mind, it didn't mean he rejected the basic mechanics of global warming.

Casual readers, perusing the headlines over the last two weeks, would be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

After Muller's two-year-old Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature project began publishing its findings on these and other questions late last month, numerous news outlets have portrayed him as a **former skeptic** whose research has led him back to the global warming fold.

Those portrayals then generated a subsequent wave of opprobrium from the small but vocal community of skeptics and deniers who think, across the broadest spectrum, that global warming is nonsense, that humans aren't contributing to it, or some mixture of both. Efforts to disown him as part of Team Skeptic ensued.

"Richard Muller is not who he says he is. He is an advocate of the theory of man-made global warming," wrote a columnist in *The Charleston Daily Mail*. "The skeptic who claims to have debunked climate skepticism never was a skeptic," declared the folks at JunkScience.com.

Muller suggested the bluster on all sides was somewhat misplaced.

"It is ironic if some people treat me as a traitor, since I was never a skeptic -- only a scientific skeptic," he said in a recent email exchange with The Huffington Post. "Some people called me a skeptic because in my best-seller 'Physics for Future Presidents' I had drawn attention to the numerous scientific errors in the movie 'An Inconvenient Truth.' But I never felt that pointing out mistakes qualified me to be called a climate skeptic."

In a nutshell, Muller and his team at Berkeley, which includes his daughter, Elizabeth, merged and analyzed a staggering amount of data collected from temperature monitoring stations the world over in order to address several complaints about climate research thus far. Skeptics, for example, have long argued -- legitimately, in Muller's view -- that climate researchers have relied on too small or too selective a sample of station data to definitively conclude that temperatures are rising; that many of the stations offer unreliable data, or are skewed upward by proximity to urban "heat islands"; or that researchers have made inappropriate adjustments in data to compensate for changes in measuring equipment and other local variables that crop up over decades of pulse-taking.

None of these concerns proved significant. "Our analysis of the complete data set showed that none of these four major concerns of the skeptics had biased the answer," Muller said.
In fact, the results closely matched most previous analyses showing a clear up-tick in temperature -- roughly 1 degree Celsius -- over the last half-century. And their estimate even exceeded the conservative estimate of a 0.64 degree increase promulgated by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Asked whether his group's findings have been mischaracterized since publication, Muller -- who has been accused of mischaracterizations of his own -- was unequivocal. "By nearly every news, radio, and TV station that has reported on us," he said. "I have been misquoted more in the last two weeks than in the prior several decades of my professional life." Among other trouble spots, Muller said, was the headline put atop his own op-ed contribution to The Wall Street Journal, which described his findings as "The Case Against Global-Warming Skepticism."

Muller said he'd submitted a much more contemplative title for the piece -- "Cooling the Warming Debate."

"I certainly feel that there is lots of room for skepticism on the human component of warming," Muller said.

Indeed, if anything qualifies Muller as any sort of climate skeptic, it's on this point -- but only in the broadest sense. What role do humans play in all this warming? The BEST team didn't examine this question, but for most researchers, it's long been a bit of a no-brainer. Carbon dioxide, among other gases, acts like a great big blanket around the planet, trapping heat in the atmosphere and driving temperatures upward. As for where the carbon dioxide is coming from, if you drive a car, use electricity or otherwise live in the modern world, just look in the mirror.

For his part, Muller doesn't dispute that human activity plays a large role, but the scientist in him remains uncertain of just how to quantify that. "Although it is not a conclusion of the Berkeley Earth group, it is my personal opinion that greenhouse gas emissions from humans have contributed to the observed warming," Muller said. "The IPCC says that 'most' of the 0.6-degree Celsius warming of the past 50 years is anthropogenic. If 'most' means between 0.3- and 0.6-degrees Celsius, then that is certainly within the realm of possibility."

Muller added that the work done by his team does show that "variations in the temperature of the North Atlantic have a much larger effect on the global land temperature than had previously been recognized." Many researchers suspect that these North Atlantic variations are due to fluctuations in what's called the "thermohaline circulation" -- a slow and deep flow of ocean water around the planet.

"If that is the case," Muller said, "then part of the [temperature] rise observed may be due to such ocean variability, and that would imply that the human contribution is less."

That caveat notwithstanding, the Charles G. Koch Foundation, a philanthropy famous for underwriting climate denialism that provided $150,000 in funding for the BEST team's work, did feel compelled to coolly qualify Muller's research as still in need of peer review.

The foundation also noted that the BEST team had examined neither humanity's role in rising temperatures, nor whether ocean temperatures -- as opposed to land-based readings -- suggest
that global warming is actually slowing, as some skeptics believe. Muller says further examination of those questions are on his to-do list.

"Scientists," he said, "have a professional responsibility to be skeptical."

Reporting for this article was contributed by Joanna Zelman.


November 3, 2011

Top Honour For International Animal Pioneer

By Sam Calvert
Religious News Servies

Oxford animal theologian Professor Andrew Linzey has been awarded a top university honour for his pioneering work around the world.

The University of Winchester is to recognise Professor Linzey with an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in recognition of his work in animal theology in a graduation ceremony on 9 November.

Professor Linzey, who is Director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, said: "I am delighted to accept this award on behalf of my colleagues at the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, who are in the forefront of pioneering this subject internationally."

"Animal ethics is now an emerging discipline with scores of university courses world-wide, and this is a tremendous boost to those working in this field."

"Animal ethics explores the challenges that new thinking poses, both conceptually and practically, to traditional understandings of human-animal relations."

Professor Elizabeth Stuart, Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor commented: "At Winchester we value and celebrate those who champion the voiceless and challenge the dominant paradigms. We shall honour one of the animals' most thoughtful and passionate champions, someone who I believe will be remembered as one of the most pioneering and influential theologians of his day."

Professor Linzey was made an Honorary Professor of the University of Winchester in 2007, and in the same year his book Creatures of the Same God was the first to be published by Winchester University Press. He is also co-editor of the Journal of Animal Ethics published by the University of Illinois Press.

"Winchester has one of the most progressive departments of theology in the country, and I am delighted to be associated with it," said Professor Linzey.
The University of Winchester graduation ceremony will take place at Winchester Cathedral on Wednesday 9 November.

*The Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, founded in 2006 by its director Professor Andrew Linzey, is an independent Centre with the aim of pioneering ethical perspectives on animals through academic research, teaching and publication. The Centre has more than 50 Fellows drawn from a variety of academic disciplines from throughout the world. For more information, see www.oxfordanimalethics.com.*


**November 2011**

Churches go green
KNTV

Many sanctuaries are switching to solar power. KNTV’s Scott Budman reports.

Watch this news story here:

[http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/45187404#45187404](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/45187404#45187404)

**November 8, 2011**

Holy cities face threat from polluting pilgrims

By George Webster
CNN

An estimated 2.5 million pilgrims have descended on the city of Mecca for the Islamic Hajj, said to be the largest annual gathering of people in the world.

Every fit and able Muslim is obliged by their faith to make the journey at least once in their lifetime. But with the rising threat of climate change, there are now calls for both pilgrims and authorities in Mecca to reduce the environmental damage wrought by this yearly influx of travelers.

"Everyone arrives at the same time, at exactly the same place, and every year there are more and more people," said Dr Husna Ahmed, principal author of "The Green Guide for Hajj," a booklet promoting ecologically-sustainable practices among Hajj pilgrims, released earlier this week.

Ahmed, who is CEO of the UK-based Faith Regen Foundation, says that as many as 100 million plastic water bottles were dumped by pilgrims during Hajj last year, according to a study conducted by colleagues at the foundation. Ahmed adds that Mecca's authorities have yet to make adequate provisions for recycling.
"All the waste from food, all the fumes from coaches traveling around the city, all the energy used for powering local hotels, it has a significant environmental impact," said Ahmed. "And that's before you think about the carbon footprint of all those flying in from halfway around the globe."

According to Ahmed, the problem is both practical and cultural. While she is eager for local authorities in Mecca to introduce energy-saving measures, like solar-powered mosques and low-carbon transport initiatives, she says that pilgrims must also become more conscious of their surroundings.

"Unfortunately, the issues of climate change and conservation are not a high priority for many Muslims, particularly those struggling with poverty in the developing world -- for whom simply getting through the day is the main consideration," said Ahmed, who hopes that her guide will help emphasize the fundamental link between the theology of Islam and the preservation of nature.

It's a message that the newly-formed Green Pilgrimage Network (GPN) is keen to highlight.

"Most religions are implicitly conservationist ... after all, if you think of God as the creator, then it surely befalls you to take care of his creation," said Martin Palmer, secretary-general of the network. It is a multi-faith organization that aims to create a worldwide alliance of holy cities committed to sustainable practices, such as banning cars on pilgrimage routes, improving waste management and investing in renewable energy.

According to the network, over 100 million people a year embark on a religious pilgrimage, making it one of the single greatest reasons for travel worldwide.

For Palmer, the environmental challenges presented by pilgrimages at holy sites like Mecca stem primarily from the trappings of modern living.

"Pilgrimages have become corrupted by consumerism," he said. "For instance, instead of buying millions of plastic bottles, 100 years ago every pilgrim would have traveled with a flask."

Launched last week in the sacred Catholic city of Assisi in Italy, the network comprises 12 founding member cities, including Amritsar in India, where they have pledged to provide clean drinking water for Sikh pilgrims traveling to the Golden Temple there; and in St. Albans in the UK, the Church of England says it will install solar panels on the local cathedral.

"This of course is just the beginning," said Palmer, who aims to have at least 300 cities signed up to the network within the next couple of years.

To join the network, he says, a city's municipal authority must undertake to work in partnership with the faith community to work towards "shared environmental goals."

Palmer hopes that being a member of the network will be seen as a badge of honor -- "like becoming a UNESCO world heritage site" -- with the threat that those who fail to live up to their commitments will lose membership.
While Mecca is not yet a member, Palmer says "The Green Guide for Hajj," is the first step in bringing the city on board.

"I understand that the religious authorities are going through the guide with a fine-tooth comb to make sure it all complies with Islamic law before giving their official endorsement," he said.

He notes that the local government in Mecca has already displayed a commitment to environmental reform, with the construction of a new metro system capable of transporting 2.5 million pilgrims between shrines currently under way, as well as ongoing discussions to provide water flasks. CNN was unable to make contact with leaders of Mecca during the Hajj holiday period to get comment.

According to Omar Faruk, founding director of UK-based pressure group EcoMuslim, conservation is not just compatible with the teachings of Islam, it is integral.

"The Quran says: 'The earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you stewards over it,'" said Faruk. "Put simply, being green is a central part of being a good Muslim."

This is music to the ears of Olav Kjorven, director of policy at the U.N. Development Program, which last year helped produce the "Muslim Seven Year Action Plan on Climate Change" and is an official supporter of the Green Pilgrimage Network.

"Religions own up to 8% of the world's habitable land and 5% of commercial forests; run or contribute to more than half of the world's schools; account for up to 7% of all global investments and offer moral and spiritual guidance to approximately 85% of all people," said Kjorven.

"Their active engagement on climate change is crucial if we are to realize a greener future for our planet."


November 9, 2011

Tutu to host Durban rally on eve of climate summit

The Mercury

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has urged South Africans to join world faith leaders, political leaders and music stars at an “extraordinary” mass rally and concert at Durban’s King’s Park Stadium on the eve of the COP17 climate change summit.

The archbishop is to host the We Have Faith – Act Now for Climate Justice rally and concert on November 27. At the event he will lead a call to world leaders attending COP17 to reach a fair and legally binding agreement to curb climate change.
Musicians including Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Arno Carstens, rap star HHP and Kenyan Gospel rapper Juliani will perform at the rally, which will be free.

Faith leaders including Pope Benedict XVI, British Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams have been invited. Those who cannot attend have been asked to send video clips of support.

Environmental campaigners Lewis Pugh, the “human polar bear”, and Braam Malherbe, a 50/50 presenter, will be among the speakers.

“Apartheid seemed an overwhelming challenge that could not be defeated but we mobilised and defeated it. We need the same passion and determination to defeat climate change,” said Tutu.

“In the face of such a huge threat, many of us feel numb and throw up our hands, believing we can’t make a difference. But we can make a difference – come to the rally.

“It will be an extraordinary event. And if you cannot come, please sign our petition on www. wehavefaithactnow.org

“We want to have over one million signatures on these petitions at the rally to hand over the world leaders.”

At the rally, Tutu will hand the petition to the COP17 chairwoman, Minister of International Relations and Co-operation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane.

The “We Have Faith” petition calls on world leaders to commit to a fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement, for a renewal of the Kyoto Protocol and for funding to help Africa adapt to climate change.

Pupils from dozens of schools throughout KwaZulu-Natal will take part in the rally, presenting environmentally themed posters and messages to the leaders and performing musical numbers.

For more information, visit www.wehavefaithactnow.org. Follow the campaign on Facebook and Twitter (“COP17ActNow”).

http://www.iol.co.za/mercury/tutu-to-host-durban-rally-on-eve-of-climate-summit-1.1174303

November 16, 2011

On the Road to Rio+20, Countries Accelerate Plans for Green Economy Transition

United Nations Environment Programme

Beijing - A new UN report demonstrates that governments and businesses alike are taking steps to accelerate a global shift towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive green future.

From China to Barbados, Brazil to South Africa, countries are developing Green Economy strategies and activities to spur greater economic growth and jobs, environmental protection and equality.

In a statement issued on the release of UNEP's flagship report, Towards a Green Economy:
Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said: "With the world looking ahead to the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012, the UNEP Green Economy report challenges the myth that there is a trade-off between the economy and the environment. With smart public policies, governments can grow their economies, generate decent employment and accelerate social progress in a way that keeps humanity's ecological footprint within the planet's carrying capacity."

Key Messages
The report, a result of a three-year global research effort involving hundreds of experts, underwent a three-month public review before being unveiled today. It confirms that an investment of two percent of global GDP across 10 key sectors is what is required to kick-start a shift from the current brown, polluting and inefficient economy to a green one.

The report estimates that such a transition would grow the global economy at around the same rate, if not higher, than those forecast, under current economic models.

But without rising risks, shocks, scarcities and crises increasingly inherent in the existing, resource-depleting, high carbon 'brown' economy, says the study.

In addition to higher growth, an overall transition to a Green Economy would realize per capita incomes higher than under current economic models, while reducing the ecological footprint by nearly 50 per cent in 2050, as compared to business-as-usual.

The Green Economy Report acknowledges that in the short-term, job losses in some sectors - fisheries for example - are inevitable if they are to transition towards sustainability.

However, it adds that over time the number of "new and decent jobs created" in sectors - ranging from renewable energies to more sustainable agriculture - will, however, offset those lost from the former "brown economy".

As a result, a growing number of countries are undertaking activities to accelerate this transition.

At the China Council meeting this week, for example, the government's international advisory group is expected to put forward its own study for moving towards a Green Economy.

China is the world's lead investor in renewable energy, overtaking Spain in 2009 and spending US$49 billion in 2010. Overall, China is committed to spending US$468 billion over the next five years, more than double the previous five years, on key industries, including renewable energy, clean technologies and waste management.

"China considers the Green Economy to be a strategic choice in an increasingly resource constrained world, and we have made that choice in our development plans," said Mr. He Bingguang, Director General of the Department of Resource Conservation and Environmental Protection in China's National Development and Reform Commission.

"We appreciate UNEP's contribution in promoting a global Green Economy transformation,
which holds the potential for all countries to benefit," he added.

Some countries, such as Barbados, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and South Africa, already have national Green Economy plans that reflect the report's recommendations.

Others such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Kenya, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Senegal and Ukraine are focusing on greening priority sectors, such as agriculture, renewable energy, tourism and clean technologies.

Today in Rwanda, East African countries are meeting to explore how laws and regulatory frameworks can help drive a Green Economy at the national and regional level. Participants from Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, as well as Rwanda, will examine case studies and continent-wide initiatives, the latter being led by the African Union.

On the business side, UNEP has teamed up with 285 of the world's leading investors, representing US$20 trillion in assets, who called on governments to mobilize action on climate change, including investments in emerging industries - like renewables and green buildings. Similar calls have been echoed by the International Chamber of Commerce, which represents hundreds of thousands of businesses in more than 130 countries.

"The elements of a transition to a Green Economy are clearly emerging across developing and developed countries alike. There are now some nations going further and faster than others which is in many ways generating a 'pull factor' that, if maintained, may bring others along over the coming months and years," said Achim Steiner, UN Under Secretary General and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

The recent drive in clean investment is not only benefitting emerging economies, but also other developing countries. According to the latest Bloomberg figures, global investments in renewable energy jumped 32 per cent in 2010, to a record US$211 billion. After the emerging economies of Brazil, China and India, countries in Africa posted the highest percentage increase of all developing regions.

In Egypt, renewable energy investment rose by US$800 million to US$1.3 billion as a result of the solar thermal project in Kom Ombo and a 220 megawatt onshore wind farm in the Gulf of Zayt. In Kenya, investment climbed from virtually zero in 2009 to US$1.3 billion in 2010 across technologies such as wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and biofuels.

In the California Mojave Desert, one of the world's largest solar-thermal power plants is under construction and others are also being built in Spain and other parts of the United States.

"The Durban climate convention meeting in a few week's time and Rio+20 next year are key opportunities to accelerate and scale-up the Green Economy. Central cooperative actions range from advancing Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), moving on green procurement to switch national efforts into the sustainability space up to a new indicator of wealth that goes beyond GDP and internalizes the costs of pollution and degradation while bringing the true value of the planet's nature-based assets into calculations of a successful and sustainable economic path," said Mr. Steiner.
A series of UN-backed regional consultations on the Green Economy have underscored the growing interest in the report. While issues of financing and trade need to be addressed further, there is an acknowledgement that the current economic model, based solely on GDP growth, has resulted in the gross misallocation of capital and inequitable distribution of wealth.

The Report shows that investing the equivalent of two per cent of global GDP into agriculture, energy, buildings, water, forestry, fisheries, manufacturing, waste, tourism and transport would not only shift the global economy onto a more sustainable growth trajectory, but it would actually maintain or increase growth over time compared to the current business-as-usual scenario.

Policy recommendations on each of the 10 key sectors, as well as on finance and enabling conditions, are outlined in the report.

On transport, for example, the report suggests that prices need to take account of the societal costs accumulated as a result of congestion, accidents and pollution, which in some cases amount to over 10 per cent of the national or regional GDP. In Beijing, a 2009 study estimated that the social costs induced by motorized transportation are equivalent to between 7.5 and 15 per cent of the city's GDP.

Globally, the transport sector's impact on natural resources is wide-ranging, from the manufacturing of vehicles, which uses metals and plastics, to its use of fossil fuels, which involves engine oil, rubber and other consumable materials. Between 2007 and 2030, the transport sector is expected to account for 97 per cent of the increase in the world's primary oil use.

With the number of vehicles in China expected to more than triple during this period, the government is promoting low-carbon, energy efficient cars and related infrastructure. In the city of Shenzhen, home of China's first electric car, plans are underway to build large recharging stations and replace traditional buses with more than 7,000 electric ones in five years time.

Generating Jobs
The Green Economy Report suggests that over time "new and decent jobs" will be catalyzed in these key sectors. A recent study by ILO and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), entitled, Low Carbon Development and Green Employment in China, confirms that this is the case.

It provides a list of likely winners and losers and the scale of direct and indirect impact involved to identify net gains. It concludes that while 800,000 workers in small coal power plants in China are likely to lose their jobs due to climate mitigation actions, some 2.5 million jobs could be created by 2020 in the wind energy sector alone.

Currently, Denmark is home to the world's top wind turbine manufacturer in terms of market volume, and China is in second place, followed by the United States and then another Chinese company. Germany ranks fifth. However, Germany has recently committed to scale up its renewable energy, following a decision to phase out nuclear power by 2022, and has thus set a
target to source 35 per cent of its electricity from renewable energies by 2022, instead of the earlier target of 19 per cent.

In Africa, despite recent economic gains, there is increasing interest in creating green and decent employment. Representatives from 11 African countries met in June this year with ILO, UNDP and UNEP to look at case studies in the areas of recycling, sustainable construction and natural resource management. As a result, participants adopted action plans for creating green jobs in fisheries, agriculture and forestry, sectors which represent over 70 per cent of the employment in the region.

In Brazil, the ILO recently helped support the construction of 500,000 new homes with solar heating systems, resulting in 30,000 new jobs. In South Africa, a similar project on water ecosystem restoration created 25,000 green jobs for previously unemployed people, and at the same time, restored vital freshwater sources.

Generating Social Equity

Approximately two billion people live on smallholder farms, and despite making a significant contribution to food security, the majority of these farmers are malnourished and live in poverty. Low prices, unfair trade practice and a lack of transport contribute to their dilemma. The Green Economy Report argues that by moving to more sustainable agriculture practices, these farmers could increase their yields and profits.

Globally, an investment of US$100-300 billion per year in green agriculture, between now and 2050, could lead to better soil quality and better yields for major crops, representing a 10 per cent increase over the current business-as-usual strategies. As many of these farmers are also women, any benefits would most likely be shared with their families and communities.

The waste sector is another area that is expected to enhance social equity. Efforts to green the sector are often driven by cost savings, environmental awareness and resource scarcity.

However, the report notes that greening the sector not only requires improving the often sub-standard waste treatment and disposal facilities, it also entails training the workers, providing more equitable compensation and ensuring proper health care protection for them. Decentralizing large scale, capital-intensive waste management operations could also provide more employment opportunities in the community.

Electronic waste (or e-waste) is also a concern, particularly for developing countries. Current estimates suggest 20 to 50 million tonnes of e-waste are generated each year, while trade in waste becomes more prevalent, heightening threats to human health and the environment.

As sales in mobile phones and computers continue to grow in China, India, and across Africa and Latin America, the report finds that resource recovery and recycling offer the greatest potential in terms of contributing to a Green Economy.

Notes to the Editors:
Rio Earth Summit: In 1992 the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, popularly known as the Rio Earth Summit, was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to address the state of the environment and sustainable development. In June 2012, there will be the follow up meeting or Rio+20 in Brazil, where one of the main themes governments are expected to address is Green Economy "in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication".

Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication can be found on the UNEP website: www.unep.org/greeneconomy

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November 18, 2011

Surge of signatures on power feed-in tariff petition

Church of England
Press Release

The Church of England is calling on the Government to slow down their plans to drop the rate of returns on electricity grid feed-in tariffs for solar panels to give churches, and other community groups, more time to complete installation. It is also asking for a special community tariff.

The online petition from the Archbishops' Council's Cathedral and Church Building Division has already attracted almost 1000 signatures from both individuals and groups. Already 35 CofE churches have solar panels installed and more than 300 are actively considering a solar project.

Installing solar panels on churches is a complex business and the 50% cut in return rate proposed for December 12 will penalize churches who are committed to installing solar panels, but will not have time to complete, says the petition.

The installation of solar panels is promoted across the CofE's 44 dioceses as a way of using natural resources to reduce the carbon footprint of a church. The Church, through its national environment campaign Shrinking the Footprint, is committed to the Government's carbon
Martyn Goss social responsibility officer for Exeter Diocese said; "This news is very disappointing. Here in the Southwest we have been encouraging churches to install panels and many will be adversely affected by this cut in tariff resulting in having the rug pulled from underneath them by such short-term political decision making".

David Shreeve the Church of England's national environment officer said: "The returns on a solar project will not be as financially attractive as they were and take longer to pay back. Whilst in the life of a church building this is not a long time it will take us into the next generation. As well as enabling churches to use renewable energy, we see solar panels on church roofs as setting a brilliant example to their local communities."

**Note to Editors:**
The Church is asking:
- That churches are exempted from the need for EPCs - provided a suitable other benchmarking audit system can be put in place*
- That churches are allowed until 31st March 2012 to complete and install projects which are currently in the pipeline and benefit from the current FIT
- That beyond 1st April 2012 churches are considered alongside other community projects for a specific community tariff.

*The Church is also asking DECC (Dept Energy & Climate Change) to consider an alternative to the Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) * which proves a building is being energy efficient. The Church of England has 12500 listed buildings many of which would have difficulty fulfilling these criteria despite using energy efficiently


**November 21, 2011**

In India, Spreading A Green Gospel Among Pilgrims

By Corey Flintoff

NPR

The Golden Temple at Amritsar, India, doesn't look like an environmental pressure point. The gold-sheathed building gleams serenely as a jewel box in the midst of a broad reflecting pond. Music serenades pilgrims as they cross a causeway to reach the shrine.

Devout Sikhs from all over India and the world come to Amritsar by the tens of thousands every day — and therein lies the rub: The pilgrims eat, pray and love their shrine almost to death. Pilgrims add to a sizable carbon footprint in the northern Indian city, where a dense population and heavy industry already are degrading air and water quality.
Amritsar is by no means unusual. Travel groups, such as the World Tourism Organization, say more than 300 million people travel for religious purposes each year.

Some of the major holy cities have formed an environmental group — the Green Pilgrimage Network — to encourage environmentally friendly practices among religious travelers. They include Assisi in Italy, Jerusalem, various Shinto shrines in Japan, Lou Guan in China, and St. Albans in England.

**Reducing The Carbon Footprint**

Amritsar is a good example of the strains that religious devotion can put on a site.

At 4 a.m., the brightly lit courtyard of the Golden Temple is already pulsing with life. Thousands of pilgrims pray and sing as they wait for the daily ritual in which the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, is carried to the sanctuary.

The book, covered in rich cloth, is placed in a litter under a golden canopy and carried across a causeway, followed by devotees. Most of the men wear the carefully wrapped turbans and uncut beards that are the most familiar marks of their religion.

Sikhs stay in touch with their faith by visiting this and other holy sites as often as they can.

"Everyone has to be here, once a year, twice a year," says Ravneet Pal Singh, who works for the environmental group EcoSikh. "People come from all over the world, wherever we have Sikh communities. They come back to India, and the one place they surely will go is the Golden Temple."

Singh says about 100,000 pilgrims and tourists visit Amritsar each day; the number triples on festivals and holy days.

"They come here, drink a lot of water and use all those facilities that you have to use when you travel to such a place," he says. "So we can change many things and reduce the carbon footprint a lot."

**Solar Panels, Harvesting Rainwater**

Singh is particularly fired up because he has just returned from a meeting of other representatives of the Green Pilgrim Cities Network in Assisi. He was part of a small delegation of city and temple officials who pledged to try to incorporate environmentally friendly practices in Amritsar.

Singh says the ideas for Amritsar include solar panels for the lighting system that keeps the temple gleaming throughout the night.

Other plans revolve around a core tenet of the Sikh religion that believers provide food for anyone who needs it.
At the Golden Temple's communal kitchen, volunteers prepare and serve about 85,000 meals each day. Singh is proud that the meals are served on stainless steel plates and bowls, so there's no plastic waste, but he says the temple wants to extend green practices to the cooking and cleaning. That will include installing solar water heaters for the scullery, where steel dishes clash like cymbals as hundreds of volunteers wash up.

Temple authorities also want to make better use of water, using sophisticated ways of harvesting rainwater.

Singh says the organizers hope to educate pilgrims by reminding them of the Earth-friendly messages that are already part of Sikh theology.

"The air is our master, water is our father, and this Earth is our great, great mother," he recites. "So this is [a] direct relation that the Sikh masters have given to us, and we should now reflect the way they taught us."

Singh says the Green Pilgrim Cities Network estimates that about 40 percent of the world's people make religious pilgrimages at some point in their lives.

That, he says, is a lot of people who are potentially ripe for Earth-friendly messages.


November 27, 2011

Pope calls for responsible, credible climate deal that takes into account world's poorest

By Nicole Winfield
Chicago Tribune

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI called Sunday for delegates attending this week's U.N. climate change conference in South Africa to craft a responsible and credible deal to cut greenhouse gases that takes into account the needs of the poor.

Some 25,000 government officials, lobbyists and scientists are expected to attend the two-week conference that opens Monday in Durban. The immediate focus is the pending expiration of the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 agreement requiring 37 industrialized countries to slash carbon emissions to 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

Western governments are expected to try to get China and other growing economies to accept legally binding curbs on greenhouse gases, as well. Poor countries want the signatories to accept further reductions in a second commitment period up to at least 2017.

Benedict, who has been dubbed the "green pope" for his environmental concerns, launched an appeal Sunday to government representatives attending the Durban conference to craft a responsible revised Kyoto deal.
"I hope that all members of the international community agree on a responsible and credible response to this worrisome and complex phenomenon, taking into account the needs of the poorest and future generations," he said during his traditional Sunday blessing from his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square.

Benedict denounced the failure of world leaders to agree to a successor treaty to Kyoto during a 2009 U.N. climate summit in Copenhagen. He said then that world peace depends on safeguarding God's creation.

The 84-year-old German pope has voiced increasing concern about protecting the environment in his encyclicals, during foreign trips, speeches to diplomats and in his annual peace message. Under Benedict's watch, the Vatican has installed photovoltaic cells on its main auditorium to convert sunlight into electricity and has joined a reforestation project aimed at offsetting its CO2 emissions.

For the pontiff, it's a moral issue: Church teaching holds that man must respect creation because it's destined for the benefit of humanity's future. He has argued that climate change and natural catastrophes threaten people's rights to life, food, health and ultimately peace.

www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-ap-eu-vatican-climate,0,2999079.story

November 28, 2011

UN boss cries over climate petition

By Sapa
East Coast Radio, Durban

United Nations climate change boss Christiana Figueres cried when she thanked religious organisations for their contribution to fighting climate change.

"We have heard your voice and your prayers. Don't give up, continue with your prayers," she said with tears in her eyes.

An emotional Figueres was addressing scores of people from different religious organisations at Durban's Moses Mabhida Stadium on Sunday afternoon.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) executive secretary said she would take the petition from the religious organisations to the of 17th Conference of Parties (COP17) which starts in Durban on Monday.

The petition read: "We call our neighbours to treat the earth with respect, resist disorder, live in peace with each other including embracing a legally binding climate change treaty."

Figueres said she appreciated the contribution made by religious organisations to fighting climate change and urged them not to give up.
"I believe that the conference we are going to have in Durban will be a step forward. Please don't give up. This is going to be a long process."

Religious leaders said they were deeply touched by Figueres' speech.

"Her speech showed that she is deeply touched that we are here. This makes us hope that something good might come out of the conference," said father Busangokwakhe Dlamini of the Traditional Anglican Church.

Ashwin Hemraju of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University said Figueres' speech created an awakening and awareness on how important the environment is to people.

"Her speech showed that everyone has to do something to address climate change," he said.

Speaking during the gathering at the stadium, International Relations Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane said the religious groups deserved a voice during the climate conference.

"That is why we are here today to take your petition. Your voice is important. Your petition will be taken seriously," she said.

Organisers of the event said they were disappointed the stadium was not full.


November 30, 2011

Durban: Last chance to get it right on climate change?

By Seán McDonagh
National Catholic Reporter

Fr. Seán McDonagh is in Durban, South Africa, reporting on the UN Climate Change Conference 2011. He will be providing updates throughout the conference. On Monday, McDonagh attended the opening address by South African President Jacob Zuma.

The United Nations climate change conference at the Conference of the Parties 17 (COP 17) began Nov. 28, in Durban, South Africa. Close to 10,000 people are expected to attend the conference, which will continue until Dec. 9.

Those attending include representatives of the world's governments, international organizations and civil society. The discussions will seek to advance, in a balanced fashion, the implementation of the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol, as well as the Bali Action Plan, agreed upon at COP 13 in 2007, and the Cancun Agreements, reached at COP 16 in December 2010.
President of the Republic of South Africa Jacob Zuma opened the conference, calling on all parties involved in the negotiations at Durban to work diligently to find a solution to the climate issues.

"For most people in the developing world and Africa, climate change is a matter of life and death," he said. "We are always reminded by the leaders of small island nations that climate change threatens their very existence."

He continued, "Recently, the island nation of Kiribati became the first country to declare that global warming is rendering its territory uninhabitable. They asked for help to evacuate the population."

But the devastation that climate change will bring will not be confined to small island nations or coastal cities in other countries.

President Zuma claimed that climate change will reduce agriculture output by 50 percent across the African continent. He drew attention to the fact that “severe drought in Somalia is exacerbating an already volatile region causing displacement of populations and increasing refugee communities in Kenya.”

If one includes the high level of population growth, which is predicted for Africa, and with falling food production, then the future will be problematic, unless significant action is taken on climate change. In South Africa itself, climate change has led to severe flooding in coastal areas. As a result, some people have lost their lives and others have lost their livelihood.

The impact of climate change is not confined to small island nations or the continent of Africa.

President Zuma said, "In the Americas, we have also witnessed the frequency of intense hurricanes on the Gulf Coast, from which the communities of New Orleans have yet to fully recover, five years after Hurricane Katrina."

In some quarters the climate change debate is often divorced from eradicating global poverty. The location of the conference in Africa should be a reminder to the delegates, as Zuma said, "that solving the climate problem cannot be separated from the struggle to eradicate poverty."

Zuma then summarized the progress that has been made to date. At COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, there was a commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 34 percent by 2020, and by 42 percent by 2025. Reductions of this scale are essential if the average global temperature is to be kept below a 2 degrees Celsius rise. A May 2011 study released by the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences, called the 2 C increase the “guard rail,” though the scientists involved would prefer if the average increase was kept below 1.5 C rather than 2 C.

In 2010, at COP 16 in Cancun, Mexico, the Parties agreed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but no number or timeline was specified.

This is very worrying because a study by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) found that the pledges made by the Parties in Cancun are insufficient in order to realize the goal
of COP 17. These pledges are not enough to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at the level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate systems. UNEP assumes that emission levels at 44 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide would probably keep the average temperature rise below 2 °C. Under a business-as-usual scenario, which is likely if there is no binding agreement at Durban, carbon emissions could reach 56 gigatonnes of carbon, creating havoc in many parts of the world.

The stakes for the future of hundreds of millions of people and vital ecosystems are very high at Durban. Toward the end of his address, President Zuma said that, given the urgency at stake, the Parties should strive to find solutions here in Durban.

"The expectation is that you must work toward an outcome that is balanced, fair and credible," he stated.

Whether this can be achieved is questionable. COP 15 in Copenhagen received massive media coverage, while the media coverage of Durban thus far has been minimal.


November 30, 2011

Groups frame climate as a moral cause

By Juliet Eilperin
Washington Post

A broad coalition of civic leaders, elected officials, and labor, environmental and social activists launched a campaign Wednesday aimed at convincing U.S. politicians that they should curb greenhouse gas emissions for moral and ethical reasons.

The Climate Ethics Campaign — which kicked off with a Capitol Hill news conference headlining Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) — comes as negotiators are struggling to make progress at U.N. climate talks in Durban, South Africa.

“We believe it’s time to talk about our moral obligation to prevent the human suffering created by climate change, to safeguard the poor and most vulnerable communities from harm they did not create, and to protect the natural environment that is the source of all life,” said campaign coordinator Bob Doppelt, executive director of the Resource Innovation Group, a nonprofit association affiliated with Willamette University.

But the call also comes at a moment when Congress has shown little appetite for tackling the issue of global warming. There is no serious drive to pass a cap on greenhouse gas emissions or a more-modest federal renewable energy standard.
The climate talks are the first in years with not a single member of Congress attending. Only a handful of congressional aides are making the trip.

The 2009 U.N. negotiations in Copenhagen represented the high-water mark in terms of congressional attendance, with then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) leading a delegation of more than 20 members to the talks. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) and Sen. James M. Inhofe (Okla.), the top Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, attended separately.

Michael Levi, senior fellow for energy and the environment at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that in 2009 the House had passed a bill that would have imposed nationwide limits on greenhouse gases, and there was an expectation at the time that the Senate might pass a similar bill in 2010. “U.S. lawmakers aren’t attending this year because there isn’t much for them to contribute absent U.S. domestic action,” Levi said.

In a statement, Inhofe noted that two years ago in Copenhagen he announced that climate legislation was dead even as Democrats assured U.N. delegates it would become law: “My friends on the other side of the aisle clearly don’t want to face world leaders now that they’ve failed to deliver and as the Kyoto process is all but dead.”

Kerry has attended six U.N. climate conferences, but his spokeswoman said he did not plan to go this year because his work on the deficit reduction committee was expected to continue through December.

House Energy and Commerce Committee ranking member Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) said he could not make the trip because Congress was in session.

At the news conference, Boxer said it would take increased public pressure to ensure action on climate change. “Right now, we do not have the votes to do what we need to do,” she said. “To take it to the next step, we need a grass-roots movement that is huge.”

Some environmentalists have questioned the Obama administration’s negotiating strategy in Durban; 16 environmental leaders sent a letter Tuesday to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton suggesting that her deputies commit to negotiating a binding climate pact by 2020.

U.S. special climate envoy Todd Stern said in statement that the administration was focused on solidifying the progress made in last year’s talks. Those talks, he said, saw “commitments for the first time from all major economies, developed and developing alike” for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, “and principles for a system of transparency so that all countries can see whether others are meeting their commitments.”


November/December 2011

Holy Water: A precious commodity in a region of conflict
IN ISRAEL, not far from the place where Jesus is said to have walked on water and fed thousands with just five loaves of bread and two fish, government engineers have performed a miracle of their own—they’ve made a river disappear. The Jordan River leaves the Sea of Galilee on its way to the Dead Sea in a slow laze past a series of campsites to a concrete complex, beside which white-robed pilgrims submerge themselves in its waters. From there, it pushes onward, winding through olive groves, farmers’ fields, and patches of brushwoods. Then, suddenly, it stops. At a pumping station less than three kilometers from the river’s source, five broad green pipes dip like elephant trunks to suck the water out. Beyond this point, the river has been reduced to less than 2 percent of its original flow.

The disappearance of the Jordan River, much like the area’s dropping aquifers, is a symptom of the struggle for water that has shaped the modern Middle East. The flow of a river that once irrigated the fields of the West Bank has been channeled through pipes, pumps, and canals to gush from the taps in Tel Aviv, and to “make the desert bloom” in the Negev. This diversion of water may be a technical marvel, but it’s emptying rivers and leaving critical aquifers dangerously susceptible to the intrusion of salt water and raw sewage.

Many, including Israel’s former prime minister Ariel Sharon, have described the 1967 Six-Day War as the first modern water war, escalating as it did from clashes between Israel, Jordan, and Syria over competing claims to the flow of the river. The war’s outcome treated the region’s water as a spoil to be divvied up among contestants, with the lion’s share going to the victor. Trace your finger along a map of the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria, and you’ll encircle the entire Jordan River basin. And beneath the West Bank, which Israel captured from Jordan, lies the country’s most important aquifer.

Meanwhile, on the losers’ side of the borders, Jordan and Syria set about snatching up what they could by building dams, digging wells, and diverting as much water as possible. In the decades since the fighting, each nation has secured the water in the areas they control. The 1994 peace treaty between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan included provisions for managing shared water resources—but it left little for the rivers, and the Palestinians who live beside them.

Once the Jordan River reaches the pumping station, the celebrated waterway quickly loses any hint of its biblical glory and hardly resembles a baptizing site. What’s left of its flow is soon soiled with sewage that enters the river as a thin, frothy, brown rivulet, widened by the addition of brackish discharge from springs unfit for drinking or irrigation. This fetid mixture meanders for another half-dozen kilometers inside Israeli territory to the border with the Kingdom of Jordan, where it is joined by the river’s largest tributary, the Yarmouk River, another waterway that has been robbed of its former glory as the region’s rivals—mostly Jordan and Syria—rush to suck up as much as they can. The Yarmouk used to power a hulking hydropower plant that still straddles the once-powerful tributary’s banks. “Today, the river couldn’t even turn a mouse wheel,” says Mira Edelstein of Friends of the Earth, which is campaigning for the river’s restoration.
To follow the river onward you have to leave its banks and drive south, parallel to its course, where, after a short stretch of farmland, a military checkpoint marks the entrance to the West Bank. Up until this point, the war over the Jordan River’s water has been a cold one, with the damage having mostly been done. But for the rest of its length, the Jordan slips through land where water conflict is still smoldering.

Once inside the Palestinian territories, the landscape undergoes a transformation. Most of the fields are yellow and barren, and shredded plastic sheets flutter on what were once greenhouses. Although out of view, the water’s presence is tauntingly clear if you look at the Jordanian side of the valley. On land the color of spinach, greenhouses line up like city blocks, a testament to what the soil can produce when properly irrigated.

Just before reaching the city of Jericho, one passes through the Palestinian village of Al-Auja. As recently as ten years ago, the village farmers were famed for their bananas, a tropical fruit they managed to grow in desertlike conditions. The village was founded in the flatlands below a mountain spring, which was carefully divided among the various families in the village. In the winter, the fields would sprout with wheat. In the spring, they’d produce vegetables. In the summer, when the rippling heat prevented the cultivation of most crops, the farmers would channel the spring’s abundant flow into their banana plantations.

But recently, production has been disrupted. Al-Auja’s farmers blame Israeli wells, which tap deep into the aquifer, for causing the spring to stutter—first the spring drops dramatically, and then, especially during the summer months, it stops altogether. The Israeli wells in Al-Auja were sunk near the springhead in order to regulate water in the deeper parts of the aquifer, pumping it out when it’s full, and allowing it to slowly replenish when it drops. The water that the wells produce enter the national system, where it’s rationed and sold to Israeli settlers and Palestinians alike. But as long as the water in Al-Auja is sold at market prices, the Israeli settlers—with superior capital, expertise, and access to the markets—are able to outbid their impoverished neighbors. The surrounding stretch of the Jordan River Valley is home to several Israeli settlements that boast orchards, vineyards, and farms. And while many of the crops are irrigated with recycled wastewater, at least some of the water is from the wells that villagers blame for drying up their spring.

Jerusalem controls 80 percent of the groundwater under the West Bank, much of which it accesses from springs inside Israel proper. To prevent overuse of the aquifer, Israel has placed heavy restrictions on the drilling of new wells—effectively freezing water consumption at dramatically unequal levels. As a result, the average Israeli consumes four times as much water as the average Palestinian, who receives well under the hundred liters a day the World Health Organization recommends as a minimum.

Contributing to the tension is the way the two populations think about water. To Israel, it is a resource to be captured, controlled, and carefully doled out—a common good, best managed by the state. For most Palestinian farmers, it’s nature’s bounty—to be divvied up in the way of their forefathers. One culture invented drip irrigation; the other relies heavily on flood agriculture. One is investing billions in state-of-the-art desalination plants; the other can barely keep its government together.

The region’s water scarcity is so severe that it makes reaching a final peace accord between the two sides presumably even more remote. Meanwhile, as both sides dither, there’s no longer enough water flowing into the Dead Sea, where the Jordan River ends its journey, to keep up
with evaporation. The once mighty river simply peters out as a weak trickle into the sea’s northern tip, which is 422 meters below sea level and dropping. Combine that with a persistent drought—a worrisome foretaste of the long droughts that scientists expect from climate change—and the result is that the lowest place on earth is losing roughly one meter of water a year. At the Ein Gedi Spa, where tourists line up for mud baths and saltwater treatments, visitors now reach the sea by shuttle—a full kilometer from where the waves once lapped.

http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/6473

December 2, 2011

Durban press conference by interfaith groups (photos and webcast)

There are several photos online from Durban of the 2 December press conference by interfaith groups:
http://www.iisd.ca/climate/cop17/2december.html

The webcast is available at:

December 3, 2011

Praying Against Climate Change

By Sudeshna Sarkar
IPS

KAVRE, Nepal - There are gasps from the audience as a series of shocking images flash across the screen: human hands eaten away by arsenic, the carcass of a cow so emaciated that it looks two-dimensional, a starved child with matchstick legs grasping at the udder of an animal for sustenance.

"I am showing you these images to make you understand why we need to focus on the environment," says the red-robed Tibetan Buddhist monk who has put together a chilling collection of photographs titled ‘A true story of Mother Earth’ on his laptop.

Karma Samdup Lama, a poor peasant’s son who became a Buddhist monk at the age of 12, now the vice-principal of a school for Buddhist novices, is showing the documentary to nearly six dozen monks and nuns gathered at the Thrangu Tashi Yangste monastery in Namo Buddha village, about 40km east of the Nepali capital.

It’s an unusual gathering. Though it started with the ‘Tashi Tsikgye’, Tibetan prayers chanted as benediction, it is a meet on climate change.

The ‘Monks’ Meet on Climate Change’ in November brought together renunciates from different monasteries and nunneries in Nepal to discuss what they can do to reduce their carbon emissions
and why they need to do it.

The meet was the brainchild of The Small Earth Nepal (SEN), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) promoting sustainable lifestyles and conservation. It had support from the Korea Green Foundation, a Seoul-based organisation working on environment conservation.

"We decided to start a climate change awareness programme with the monks and nuns because Nepal is a deeply religious place," says Niranjan Bista, SEN’s coordinator for the project. "It looks up to the religious communities for inspiration and role models."

Though Nepal is home to diverse religions, SEN chose the Buddhist community after research by Sundar Layalu who, as part of a British Council project, made the surprising discovery that monasteries have higher than normal carbon emissions.

Buddhism rejects physical luxuries to achieve spirituality and monks live an austere life. Yet Layalu, who chose the Thrangu Tashi Yangste monastery for his 2009-2010 research, found its carbon emissions unusually high due to a combination of fossil fuel use and a regular stream of visitors.

"The monasteries are often located at remote, high places; transporting food and other things require more car fuel. They also use generators to pump up drinking water. Besides, there is also the heavy use of incense," says Sudarshan Rajbhandari, vice-president at SEN.

SEN trained monks to cook their food using briquettes made out of waste materials. In addition, the monastery has started using solar panels to heat water, replaced tea cups with bio-degradable earthen mugs, stepped up tree plantation and banished plastic bags.

"The Buddha taught to protect the environment," says Karma Sandup. "He said we owe our existence to the four elements – water, earth, air and fire – and we have to conserve them. He also said plants should be nurtured till they became trees, like a mother protects her child."

Karma Drolma a 55-year-old nun from Nepal’s remote, mountainous Manang district, who joined the Thrangu Tara Abbey for Tibetan Buddhist nuns when in her early teens can read and write only in the Tibetan language and remains cloistered, but she is aware of the changes taking place due to global warming.

"The mountains are melting and rivers are receding," she says. "If this continues, all water would vanish one day and both people and animals will die."

Bista says there was a special reason to choose the monastery at Namo Buddha for the climate awareness meet. "It is a well-known trekking and tourist destination and we hope the message will go out to these people as well."

The monks’ meet ends with a pledge to do whatever is possible to resolve the global threat of climate change "which will ultimately entail ever greater human suffering, inequity, and irreversible damage to the earth."
A billboard, standing sentinel at the monastery entrance, reminds residents and visitors of the Buddha’s teachings.

"The Buddha taught that the well-being of all life on earth, not just humans, is important and equally valuable," the billboard says. "Hence we have an obligation to adhere to a more thoughtful way of living, which results in a natural balance and a harmonious future."

*This article is one of a series supported by the Climate and Development Knowledge Network.*

http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=106084

December 5, 2011

BC First Nations Unite To Ban Export Of Tar Sands Oil

By Beth Buczynski
Care2.com

For the first time in Canadian history, First Nations, whose territory encompasses the entire coastline of British Columbia, have publicly united to oppose the transport of tar sands crude oil through their land.

Over 60 nations have signed the Save the Fraser Declaration, which bans tar sands oil pipelines throughout the Fraser River watershed, an area that was never ceded to the Canadian government, and therefore not legally under the government’s control.

“North or south, it makes no difference. First Nations from every corner of BC are saying absolutely no tar sands pipelines or tankers in our territories,” said Chief Jackie Thomas of Saik’uz First Nation, a member of the Yinka Dene Alliance. “We have banned oil pipelines and tankers using our laws, and we will defend our decision using all the means at our disposal.”

The First Nations’ refusal to allow tar sands oil extraction or transport through their would make it legally impossible for the Canadian government to move forward with many high price oil production projects. Monday’s announcement – on the first anniversary of the Save the Fraser Declaration – comes in response to recent calls from the Harper government and oil executives to push through pipeline and tanker projects against the wishes of British Columbians and First Nations.

“The government can talk all it wants about pushing tar sands oil pipelines and tankers through BC. There is no way our Nations will allow it,” says Chief Art Adolph representing the St’at’imc Nation. “If they are serious about respecting our rights, the government of Canada must stop pushing the oil companies’ line that this is in the public interest, and the government of BC should step up to the plate too and begin protecting our rivers and coastlines from further environmental damages that violate our basic human rights. Especially now, when Canada is a global embarrassment for failing to address climate change and systemically ignoring Indigenous rights.”
The Save The Fraser Declaration prohibits tar sands crude oil tankers in the ocean migration routes of Fraser River salmon. Until now, the Declaration has been used to fight Enbridge’s northern pipeline plans. Now it is being recognized by First Nations as effectively banning tar sands crude oil exports on the whole coast, including the south.

Related Reading:

Canadian Government Says Tar Sands Emissions Could Double

Radiohead Singer Speaks Out Against Tar Sands

The Dirty Truth About Tar Sands Oil Extraction [Video]

http://www.care2.com/causes/bc-first-nations-unite-to-ban-export-of-tar-sands-oil.html

December 7, 2011

U.S. Believers Favor International Action on Climate Change, Nuclear Risk: UMD Poll

University of Maryland Newsdesk

COLLEGE PARK, Md. - A majority of Americans professing belief in God favor cooperative international efforts to combat climate change and the spread of nuclear weapons, says a new public opinion poll conducted jointly by the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) and its Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

The nearly 1,500 Americans surveyed include large numbers of Catholics and Evangelicals.

The study, Faith and Global Policy Challenges: How Spiritual Values Shape Views on Poverty, Nuclear Risks, and Environmental Degradation, also finds that a majority of believers consider addressing global poverty a "spiritual obligation," and think that the United States should work cooperatively with other nations to reduce it.

"This research challenges common political stereotypes that pigeonhole religious Americans as liberal or conservative on environmental and nuclear proliferation issues," says University of Maryland Public Policy Professor and study co-author John Steinbruner, who directs CISSM.

"These findings demonstrate the public's strong moral impulse to address global policy challenges - an impulse that if applied properly could break the current impasse on these issues," Steinbruner adds.

Though most believers in the research do not consider addressing environmental and nuclear risks to be spiritual obligations, they do understand these issues as a part of "good stewardship," the study finds.
"While for many believers there is a tenuous connection between their spiritual values and issues related to the environment and the risk of nuclear war, they are nonetheless very responsive to the idea that there is an obligation to protect God's creation, or to be good stewards of the earth," explains study co-author Steven Kull, director of PIPA.

**SPECIFIC FINDINGS**

**Stewardship:** 3 out of 4 believers embrace the idea that they have an obligation to act as good stewards of the environment; 4 out 10 believers say the obligation to be a good steward of the environment includes the obligation to prevent nuclear war.

**Environmental Laws:** 2 out of 3 believers agree that there is an obligation to care for God's creation by supporting environmental laws and regulations.

**Binding International Agreements:** Majorities of believers approve of the United States entering into binding international agreements aimed at protecting the environment (including by reducing greenhouse gases) and reducing the risk of nuclear war.

- 7 in 10 believers reject the argument that reducing greenhouse gases would be too harmful to the economy, instead favoring the idea that it will help the economy in the long run through greater energy efficiency.
- 8 in 10 believers support negotiating an international agreement to lower the number of nuclear weapons on high alert.
- A majority of believers support pursuing the elimination of nuclear weapons.

**Scientific Consensus on Climate Change:** Only four in ten (three in ten among Evangelicals) think that there is a consensus among scientists that urgent action on climate change is needed and that enough is known to take action. Those who perceive such a consensus are more supportive of taking action on climate change. Those who perceive such a consensus are also more likely to see it as a spiritual obligation.

**SAMPLING ERROR**

The poll was fielded from September 9 to 19, 2011 with a sample of 1,496 adult Americans. The poll was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population.

The margin of error for the general population is plus or minus 3.3 percent. The subgroup margins of error: for Evangelicals, plus or minus 6.4 percent and plus or minus 5.7 percent for Catholics.

'BELIEVERS'

At the beginning of the poll, all respondents were asked, "Would you say you believe in God or do not believe in God?" Eighty-five percent of the general answered they did believe in God, while 14 percent said they did not. When respondents were asked whether they felt "there are spiritual obligations to act in certain ways," or whether they did "not think in these terms," 67
percent said they felt there are spiritual obligations; 32 percent said they did not think in these terms.

FULL REPORT

The full text report of the research is available online: http://ter.ps/4o

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December 7, 2011

Spreading the global warming gospel

A climatologist in West Texas takes on skeptics with scientific data — and her own faith as an evangelical Christian.

By Neela Banerjee
Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Lubbock, Texas

When Katharine Hayhoe was faced with telling a group of petroleum engineers in the heart of the Texas oil patch that the main culprit for climate change is humanity's consumption of fossil fuels, she expected pushback.

"Aren't you scientists just in this for the money?" one older man asked — the latest insult after a string of anonymous emails asserting that she and other climatologists were corrupt liars.

Most climatologists refuse to answer skeptics, preferring to let the research speak for itself.
Hayhoe is one of a small but growing number of scientists willing to engage climate change doubters face to face. Unlike most of her colleagues, she is driven as much by the tenets of her faith as the urgency of the science.

A rising star among climatologists, Hayhoe, the daughter of missionaries, is also an evangelical Christian. Though the science supporting climate change grows ever more compelling, fewer Americans now accept the scientific consensus than they did three years ago. No group is more resistant than political conservatives, especially white evangelical Christians, who often say that climate change is a hoax.

Besides teaching at Texas Tech in Lubbock, conducting research and writing, Hayhoe meets with Christian colleges, church groups, senior citizens, professional associations and just about anyone else to explain that Earth's climate is changing and that human beings are behind it.

Like any climatologist, she is armed with data. Yet Hayhoe also speaks of climate change in a language to which conservative Christians can relate, about protecting God's creation and loving one's neighbors. Hayhoe is a climate change evangelist in the West Texas Bible Belt, compelled by her faith to protect the least among us by sharing what she knows, even if it's science that many around her reject.

"People ask me if I believe in global warming. I tell them, 'No, I don't,' because belief is faith; faith is the evidence of things not seen," Hayhoe said. "Science is evidence of things seen. To have an open mind, we have to use the brains that God gave us to look at the science," she said.

Hayhoe, who serves as a reviewer for the main United Nations report on climate change, focuses her work on understanding and communicating the complex effects expected from climate change.

"She is perhaps the best communicator on climate change," said John Abraham, associate professor of thermal sciences at the University of St. Thomas and founder of the Climate Science Rapid Response Team, an information clearinghouse.

One brisk, windy morning recently, Hayhoe took the stage at Wayland Baptist University, a small school about an hour from Lubbock.

"We have parents and communities who have a natural tendency to distrust science, and that's unfortunate," said Herbert Grover, dean of Wayland's school of math and science. "We asked Katharine to come because we wanted to take full advantage of her credentials as a scientist and as a Christian."

She tells the 300 students in sweats and Uggs that even if they ignore thermometers, scientists and data, they can still see the impact of climate change beyond their windows. An epic drought has gripped Texas, with climate change likely worsening the low rainfall that comes with the La Nina weather pattern in the region.

"A one- or two-degree increase in the world's temperature may not seem like much," she tells the students in the chilly auditorium, most paying attention rather than sleeping or texting. "But
think of your own body when your temperature goes up by one and a half degrees. It means you're getting sick."

Hayhoe, 39, moved to Texas six years ago when her husband, Andrew Farley, was hired as a professor of linguistics at Texas Tech and as pastor of Ecclesia, a small evangelical church in Lubbock. Brought in to Texas Tech's geoscience department, Hayhoe now teaches in the political science department, because, she said, "climate change is a very political science in West Texas."

A Canadian, Hayhoe's first efforts as a climate change evangelist focused on her skeptic husband: Like many American evangelicals, Farley grew up thinking that environmentalism was a leftist cause. "I saw climate change as the same as saving the whales, hugging trees and wearing hemp," he said.

As Hayhoe's reputation grew, several of Farley's close friends voiced disapproval of her research, and he raised objections too. To answer Farley's questions, Hayhoe showed him data that reveal, for instance, how Earth's temperature has risen markedly after the Industrial Revolution — as the combustion of fossil fuels grew.

Hayhoe's success in changing other minds has been uneven.

Her book for evangelicals, "A Climate for Change," sells tepidly because Christian bookstores won't stock it. At a senior citizen center in Lubbock, a man shaking with rage shouted an expletive-studded monologue about how the greenhouse effect doesn't exist. At a talk for Texas Tech business school students, her arguments were simply dismissed. At the end of any given talk, perhaps one person might tell Hayhoe she's convinced him of the scientific consensus on global warming.

Lately, though, something may have shifted. At a recent talk at Wayland Baptist, no one was rude, and Rick Ross, a 21-year-old math major, told Hayhoe she had inspired him to "go out and do something."

Hayhoe was surprised. "What was that all about?" she said to Grover, her host, as they gathered her things after her last talk of the day. "Nobody challenged me? Maybe those people didn't come."

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December 11, 2011

Climate Talks End With Hope for a New More Comprehensive Legally-Binding Agreement

United Nations Environment Programme
Significant Emissions Gap However Remains With Doubts on How it Will be Decisively Bridged by 2020

Kyoto Protocol to Continue-But Covers Only a Fraction of the Necessary Global Emissions

Durban - Several key and important steps forward were agreed at the UN climate convention meeting that closed today in Durban, including an agreement to negotiate a new and more inclusive treaty and the establishment of a Green Climate Fund.

But the outcome in the South African coastal city has left the world with some serious and urgent challenges if a global temperature rise is to be kept under 2° Celsius in the 21st century.

The 'Bridging the Emissions Gap' report, coordinated by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) with climate modeling centres across the globe, underlined in the run-up to Durban that the best available science indicates that greenhouse gas emissions need to peak before 2020.

It also underlined that annual global emissions need to be around 44 Gt of CO₂ equivalent by around that date in order to have a running chance of achieving a trajectory that halves those emissions by 2050 below 2005 levels.

The report also concluded that bridging the divide is economically and technologically do-able if nations raise their emission reduction ambitions and adopt more stringent low-carbon policies across countries and sectors.

The key question of the Durban outcome is whether what has been decided will match the science and lead to a peaking of global emissions before 2020 to maintain the world on a path to keep a temperature increase below 2° Celsius.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "The outcomes of Durban provide a welcome boost for global climate action. They reflect the growing, and in some quarters unexpected, determination of countries to act collectively. This provides a clear signal and predictability to economic planners, businesses and investors about the future of low-carbon economies. A number of specific commitments agreed in Durban also indicate that previous decisions on financing, technology and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) are moving to implementation."

"The big question many will ask is how this will translate into actual emission reductions and by when? Whatever answer will emerge in the coming months, Durban has kept the door open for the world to respond to climate change based on science and common sense rather than political expediency," he added.

By some estimates the cost of cutting emissions will cost four times more beyond 2020 than they would cost today with the price rising over time.
By some estimates the current emissions trajectories, unless urgently reversed, could lead to a global temperature rise of 3.5° Celsius or more sometime by the end of the century.

"The Government of South Africa and the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change should be congratulated for what has been achieved, given the low expectations in the months and weeks before Durban," added Mr. Steiner.

Today the European Union and several other countries agreed to continue the Kyoto Protocol beyond 2012 if other governments, including major emitters from developed and developing ones, agreed to negotiate a new legally binding treaty with deeper emission reductions by 2015 to come into force afterwards.

The continuation of the Kyoto Protocol during this new negotiation phase means the provisions of this existing emission reduction treaty, ranging from emissions trading to the Clean Development Mechanism, will also continue providing some benefit to the climate and the ambitions of developing economies over the near term.

**Green Climate Fund, Adaptation and Technology**

Durban also made progress on the decision at last year's UN climate convention meeting in Cancun, Mexico, to establish a Green Climate Fund.

The operationalization of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) is a key step forward as is reconfirmation of the commitment of mobilizing US$100 billion to support developing countries by 2020.

Readiness actions in developing countries will be a vital part of helping prepare for the investments that will eventually flow from the GCF. Other steps forward included operationalizing Cancun agreements on adaptation and technology.

In Durban governments agreed to establish an Adaptation Committee and a process that will lead to the establishment of a Climate Technology Centre and Network with likely funding from the Global Environment Facility.

"The movements forward on the Cancun agreements in respect to adaptation and climate technology institutions are welcome, as is the operationalization of the Green Climate Fund. But the core question of whether more than 190 nations can cooperate in order to peak and bring down emissions to the necessary level by 2020 remains open—it is a high risk strategy for the planet and its people," said Mr. Steiner.

"Nationally many governments are acting as are companies, cities and individual citizens. In 2010, over US$210 billion was invested in renewable energy, for example. But this bottom-up approach needs a top to which it can aim—and a time line for building that top is narrowing ever year," he added.

**For More Information Please Contact**
Long Islanders rally against hydrofracking in New York State

By Karen Rubin
Long Island Populist Examiner

Long Islanders gathered to send a message to Albany that New York State should ban hydraulic fracturing altogether, rather than parse new rules to unleash natural gas extraction companies to dig some 70,000 wells upstate.

Representatives from Food & Water Watch, Grassroots Environmental Education, Reach Out America and other organizations sharply criticized proposed standards as failing to protect the state's residents from the highly polluting method of gas drilling.

"Fracking poses a threat to Long Island's air, food and water," said Sam Bernhardt, a Long Island native who works for Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit consumer group that supports a ban on fracking "There are safer alternatives to natural gas, but there are no alternatives to water. We urge Governor Cuomo and Long Island legislators to put our health before industry profits and ban fracking."

New York State Assemblywoman Michelle Schimel, a member of the Assembly Committee on Environmental Conservation, said she attended numerous public hearings on hydrofracking. "I remain with a nagging uncertainty about the safety of the process. Certainly the decisions made about the drilling will be New York's environmental legacy. The New York State Legislature is poised to take a leadership role in recognizing that the health and welfare of its citizens comes before profit."

Schimel raised concerns about the contamination of the water supply, increased traffic and wear and tear on infrastructure, and how the contaminated water that is injected will be treated, especially when the companies maintain that the list of chemicals used is proprietary (secret). She raised concerns about how flooding that has occurred upstate would impact, and even earthquakes.
"What about leakage from underground pipes? The industry claims they are safe, double bounded. But for the first time, the EPA linked water pollution with hydrofracking in Wyoming, most likely it is seeping up in the well. It flies in the face of longstanding claims that this is a safe process."

Another concern for Long Islanders is property taxes. But so far, there has been no study on the impact on values of property close to the wells.

"And when you have a pool that is filled with waste, who will clean up that mess 40 years from now?"

"Many Long Islanders feel that they are safely removed from the proposed fracking areas upstate, but that is not true," stated Patti Wood, Executive Director of Grassroots Environmental Education. "We already live in a non-attainment area - meaning that the air quality does not meet federal standards - and air pollution from fracking operations can travel hundreds of miles" and Long Island is downwind. "In addition, some of Long Island's water treatment plants, like Glen Cove, have been identified as potential sites for dumping toxic radioactive flowback fluid (or wastewater) that comes back up the well with the gas."

In addition to the risks that this processing would pose, this means that dozens of diesel trucks would be making the trek from upstate to Long Island, carrying toxic chemicals and radioactive materials. Each well, she said, requires 1000 diesel trips, and the state is poised to issue permits for more than 70,000 wells.

Trucks, all running on diesel, operate 24/7, and diesel emissions have been linked to asthma and cancers. "The EPA has said there is no safe level of exposure to diesel exhaust."

She also contradicted any claim that the processes are "safe." "Accidents happen. They promise, but they can never guarantee," as demonstrated with the Exxon-Mobil spill in Montana; the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico and Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant failure, triggered by the earthquake and tsunami.

She also countered the claim that the natural gas would benefit New Yorkers or Americans, easing prices or dependence on foreign sources, noting that the companies have applied for export licenses to ship the natural gas overseas. "Dick Cheney made sure they were fully exempted from Clean Water, Clean Air and Safe Drinking Water regulations."

"Cuomo, by himself will decide. Governor Cuomo has an obligation to protect this state and its citizens and be the first governor in the nation to say no to the oil and gas industries," Wood said.

"The damage cannot be undone once it has started."

"I met [New York State] Senator Jack Martins a short while ago, and he told me that if I had any concerns I should contact him," said Patty Katz, chair of Reach Out America's Green Committee. "Well, Senator, we have some major concerns about fracking."
"As Jews, we are sensitive to the ethical implications of hydrofracking," stated Rabbi Lina Zerbarini, Director, Weinberger Center for Jewish Life and Learning at the Sid Jacobson Jewish Community Center. "We value life above all else, and place limits on what we are allowed to do for profit. We are obligated to protect the poor and the vulnerable who suffer first from unregulated exploitation of natural resources. We recognize our responsibility to safeguard the earth for our children and grandchildren The expansion of hydrofracking cannot be aligned with these values."

Afnan Gilani, President of the Long Island Teen Environmental Activists said, "The purpose of LITEA is to educate others on some of the most prevalent environmental toxins, what products contain them, and how exactly these chemicals are contributing to increasing rates of diseases in humans Some of the most recent emerging trends in disease patterns can relate to environmental exposures.

"The public health offices of New York State have deemed methods used to obtain natural gasses unsafe. More than 25% of the chemicals used in natural gas operations have been known to have adverse effects on humans, which include mutations, brain damage, birth defects and cancer. This detrimental process is hydrofracking. Three of the known carcinogens used in hydrofracking are benzene, formaldehyde, and naphthalene. These chemicals are so toxic that even the slightest concentration of them exposed to our air or ground water supply can pollute our environment enough to cause both short term and long-term health effects on humans. On behalf of LITEA we would like to call on Governor Cuomo of New York State to ban hydrofracking."

Laura Weinberg, President of the Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition, pointed to a report released last week by the Institute of Medicine on the connection between breast cancer and the environment that linked benzene and ethylene oxide with breast cancer. "Benzene and ethylene oxide, which are known carcinogens, are used in the fracking process." she said that in Texas, breast cancer rates were raised significantly in areas near fracking sites, while rates declined in the rest of the state.

"With breast cancer rates already high on Long Island and in New York State, what kind of legacy are we leaving for our children by allowing fracking chemicals that are linked to breast cancer to be released into our environment? One out of three women and one out of two men will be diagnosed with cancer. Is this the legacy to leave?"

"Every one here knows or knew someone with breast cancer," said Karen Miller, with the Huntington Breast Cancer Coalition. "We've said all along that cancer is not caused by genes alone - if the air we breathe is contaminated, how in the world can we reduce the risk? How in the world can we protect our daughters? We hear over and over again again that we can reduce toxic exposure by changing persoanl behavior. Is that enough? No!"

"We live in a world that wants to address illness after we're exposed to chemicals that cause illness This ban offers us an opportunity to protect, to prevent further exposure to cancer-causing chemicals that continue to plague all our families, our children, our communities. We call out to Governor Cuomo to ban hydrofracking in New York State."
"Years ago, Long Islanders raised their voices and demanded more resources for environmental studies. These studies have proved a cause and effect relationship between toxic chemicals and the onset of disease. Now is the time for regulatory action, regulatory protection."

"As the current and future inhabitants of this planet, it is our obligation to maintain and protect what is naturally ours," said Jason Adesman, a junior at Roslyn High School. "Not only will these harmful effects, such as the contamination of our water supply, the deforestation of areas upstate and the release of greenhouse gases affect our own lives as humans, but it will also cause significant damage to the entire environment. If this practice is allowed in our state, it opens the door for other states and regions to adopt it, and our duty as New Yorkers is to set the example and hopefully a precedent and have it stop here."

Eric Weltman of Food & Water Watch said, "We are up against an industry with the ability to spend millions on advertising. But the good news is we have truth on our side. We are organizing across Long Island, building a movement to take on the oil and gas industry.

"There are safer alternatives to natural gas, but no alternative to safe water. Ban fracking now."

Comments can be submitted to the Department of Conservation (DEC) and letters to Governor Cuomo’s office through January 11.

To submit comments online, go to the DEC website: www.dec.ny.gov/energy/76838.html

You can also send a letter to:

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Facebook Campaign: A Million Fracking Letters

See also:

Hundreds of New Yorkers turn out for DEC hearing to oppose hydraulic fracturing and slideshow

Hydrofracking Upstate poses health risk to Long Islanders, local opponents say