



GPN Newsletter Number 8, September 2013

Dear Friends and Fellow Pilgrims

This newsletter follows on from our second Green Pilgrimage Meeting in Norway July 26-28 2013 in the beautiful, and environmentally friendly pilgrim city of Trondheim.

Ninety religious and secular leaders and representatives joined us, from China, Japan, India, Palestine, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Armenia and Europe to share stories of their journey to make their pilgrim places more sustainable. This newsletter is our ‘Trondheim edition’.

What to do with the flip-flops?

Arvind Padhee is Chief Administrator of the Jagannath Temple in the pilgrim city of Puri in India. He came hot foot to Trondheim the day after overseeing the annual Ratha-yatra Chariot Festival. It's quite an event, bringing in about five million pilgrims over 12 days. About 1.2 million people each day walk behind three Hindu deities carried on enormous, colourful chariots pulled by devotees. We were delighted to learn that our English word juggernaut, for ginormous truck, comes from these chariots



Yes, Arvind had issues of crowd control, toilets (never enough), waste (always too much) and the big question every year of where so many people would stay (tents, usually). But he had one other question for the Green Pilgrimage Network as Puri becomes one of the 16 new members.

What to do with the two truckloads of flip-flops left behind after every festival?

Imagine you're walking in a huge crowd, and someone treads on the back of your flipflop, pulling it off. You can't go back to pick it up, in fact it might even be dangerous if you ducked down in such a crowd. So you continue, half-bare-footed, and if you have been to the Ratha-yatra before, you might even have brought a spare pair with you.

And so, each year the flip-flops pile up and each festival Arvind Padhee wonders what to do with them. There are no recycling facilities and he'd like a solution.

I could hear the flip-flop question being discussed at different tables at Trondheim, where delegates were swapping tales from their pilgrim cities - whilst enjoying Norwegian hospitality at a hotel famed for winning awards for serving the best breakfast in the country. (How many types of smoked fish are there? They were all delicious and local)



Wendy Brawer, Founder of Green Maps (which is the organization we

commissioned to design the GPN logo for us, and which helped Trondheim make a green map this summer) suggested we hold a competition, or an online debate. She made a video about the flip flop question and sent it to Sustainability Maker- an online market place for sustainable solutions and contacted a group in New Jersey which has made floors from flip-flops for playgrounds and has a worldwide recycling scheme. This is one to watch! Not only because of the flipflops but because it's an example of the ideas-sharing ethos which is part of the structure of our network

And what to do with the polybags?

There were other brainstorm challenges. For example, Yassin Maisikeli, of the Qadiriyyah Sufi Movement in Nigeria, told us about how the government banned 1.3 million commercial motorcycles from operating: the idea was to reduce the risk of them being used by suicide bombers, but it had this unexpected effect of improving air quality. However, rubbish remains a pressing issue in his home city of Kano, northern Nigeria (which joined the GPN in 2011).



In Nigeria, clean water is sold in little plastic bags called "polybags". They are everywhere: in parks, in streets, eaten by animals, fluttering through the air in the wind. Earlier this year, the Qadiriyyah Movement launched a pilot

programme in two of its schools where each child picks up 100 discarded polybags every week and brings them to the school's recycling point. In turn they receive academic points. Some of the polybags are used for growing tree seedlings in nurseries run by the schools. But what about the others? There is little or no municipal recycling in Nigeria?

A solution from Armenia?

The Armenian delegates had one possible answer. The Armenian Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation (ACT) has set up a scheme to cut and weave plastic waste into sturdy bags and other useful household items.

They've offered to make a short video to share the process with Kano and others with similar problems. [Here's an inspiring video](#) on green hospitality in Etchmiadzin, their pilgrim city and spiritual capital. <http://tinyurl.com/nkzdb8r>



Yassin wondered if the woven plastic bags could be used by the 1.5 million West African pilgrims who go to Kano each year for the Maukib pilgrimage and by pilgrims from Nigeria going to the Hajj? Not using plastic bags is one of the recommendations of the GPN's Green Guide for Hajj, which Yassin has recently translated into Hausa. But these woven ones would of course be exempt!

Environmentalist Chris Baines wondered if there were other uses for the woven plastic bags- for example, could they be used as mats put down to protect newly planted tree seedlings preventing water loss?

And the conversation was still going on at breakfast the next day...with more smoked fish, Norwegian cheese and wonderful local berries...

Our Challenge

Everyone agreed that exploring practical solutions to issues such as waste, plastic, recycling, transport and sanitation is one of the key aims of the Green Pilgrimage Network. The question is how to do that best, within a very small budget.

Suggestions made in Trondheim for how we can go forward included:

- A new, possibly interactive, website.
- Competitions for videos of good ideas for practical solutions to problems that many members have (aka best practice),
- Theme meetings for members every three years on topics like waste, food, solar or water, and meetings of regional chapters to focus on country-specific issues.

New Green Pilgrimage Network Chapters

India is a country where on any given day thousands if not millions of people are on pilgrimage. It has more pilgrim sites than anywhere else in the world and is the only country I know where you can tick a box marked “pilgrimage” as your reason for entry. At Trondheim we welcomed five new pilgrim city members from India: Nanded, Puri, Rishikesh, Ujjain and Varanasi, as well as two important tiger and wildlife reserves (Rajaji and Ranganbore) which have millions of pilgrims walking through.

No surprise then that the India Chapter of the GPN is underway, with the backing of the Hindu Environmental Project, Bhumi, EcoSikh (our Environment programme with the Sikhs), ICLEI, the largest international association of local governments committed to sustainable development. We are working with ICLEI to conduct assessments on six pilgrimage sites: this will help them draw up action plans to improve the management of water, energy and waste as well as to improve their protection of wildlife, parks, plants etc. Emani Kumar, Executive Director for ICLEI’s South Asia office, told us he hopes this can lead to funding and new secular and religious partnerships in pilgrim cities. We’re planning a meeting in India at the end of 2014.



Candles in memory of...

One of our delegates from India was Dr Nanditha Krishna, of the C P Ramaswami Aiyar foundation in Chennai. She led us in remembrance for the many thousands of pilgrims who lost their lives after the floods in Uttarkhand Province in the weeks before our meeting. Nearly 16,000 people died in the floods in north India.

I was struck by her observation that the recent devastation is what happens when pilgrimages are no longer green and don't follow the rules set out by the faith tradition. She spoke of how Hinduism, for example, has rules that pilgrims shouldn't spend more than one night at pilgrimage sites, should travel if possible by foot and take their own provisions, cook their own food, use fallen twigs to make a fire, only eat once a day and leave a sacred place as it was when they arrived. This means no pollution, no garbage and not disturbing the environment. That had not been happening in the Himalayan areas struck by flooding. For her, that means a rethink about building shops, restaurants and hotels to cater for visiting pilgrims and a return to a much more simple form of pilgrimage.

The day before the meeting, around 80 pilgrims travelling to Santiago de Compostela for the Feast Day of St James died in train crash a few miles short of the city. We lit a candle in their memory and were grateful that three delegates

from Santiago de Compostela could join us for the end of our meeting, so we could welcome them as new members of the GPN.



A fledgling European chapter

Santiago de Compostela was keen to join other pilgrim cities and places to explore setting up a European Chapter of the GPN. On our final day members from Canterbury, Iona, Norwich, St Albans, Sweden, Scotland, Norway and Armenia joined with ARC and the European Association of The Via Francigean Ways to discuss just that.

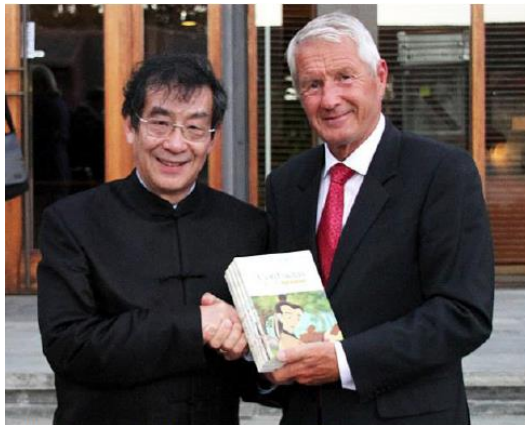
It was Thorbjorn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee and previous Prime Minister of Norway, who reminded us in his keynote speech that “faith goes to the very heart of European society and civilization.”

“Different religious, different holy sites, yet on the same page and working towards the same goal. This is a valuable lesson for the world. It is an important reminder that despite difficulty times – be it the crushing weight of austerity measures here in Europe or revolutionary turmoil in the Middle East- we need to stay focused on what is truly important: and that is how we treat each other as well as the world around us...”

It is this spirit of diversity and shared responsibility embodied in the greening of pilgrimage cities and routes that the world needs so much right now. The example of the Green Pilgrimage Network shows us that we need to hold communities up to high standards of behaviour and remind ourselves of what we have in common, not our divisions.

The Network will only work if it engages secular partnerships as well as religious groups. From transport providers to solar power experts. From local NGOs to academic institutions and environmental organisations. Only then will it be possible to receive and accommodate millions of pilgrim visitors sustainably. Only then will it be possible to spread greener living habits within our community.”

We look forward to working with the new secular partners present at Trondheim: UNEP’s Partnership for Sustainable Tourism and The European Association of the Via Francigena Ways. One of their aims is to lay the foundation for the future creation of a European Network of the pilgrimage routes certified by the Council of Europe.



Professor Tu Weiming presents Confucian texts to Torbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, at the Trondheim meeting

Exciting news from China

ARC’s Secretary General, Martin Palmer, has just returned from China this week where he’s been meeting with the Chinese delegation who travelled to Trondheim to announce the launch of a new conservation alliance in China. The President of the new International Confucianist Ecological Alliance (ICEA), Professor Tu Weiming, presented the first Confucianist statement on the environment to the meeting.

Confucianists are now hoping to “green” what could be called the biggest pilgrimage event in China. It’s Qing Ming (Ching Ming in Hong Kong) the festival of honouring ancestors which takes place around April. It involves around 300 million people traveling to their ancestral tombs and in accordance with Confucian ritual burn paper offerings and give food to their ancestors.

The Daoists, whose holy site of Louguan was a founding member of the GPN, now plan to make two more of their pilgrim cities greener. Watch this space!

Welcome to our 15 new GPN members

Here are our new members:

- India: Nanded and Takhat Sri Hazur Sahib, Puri, Rajaji and Ranthambore Tiger reserves, Rishikesh and Varanasi
- Mexico: Mexico City and the Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe,
- Middle East: Bethlehem, Friends of the Earth Middle East and the Lower Jordan River project,
- Sri Lanka: Matale
- Sweden: Vadstena
- Spain: Santiago de Compostela

UK: Canterbury, Iona and Norwich Cathedral



We look forward to their stories of action. You can link to their plans from the [ARC website](#).

There's also a new Green Pilgrimage Network leaflet on the website and, of course, you can check out photos of the Trondheim meeting on [Flickr](#) and our [ARC Facebook](#) account.

Thanks to Trondheim and going forward

Our thanks to the city of Trondheim for their hospitality. In particular, thanks to Mayor Rita Ottervik, Rev Berit Lanke, Director of the National Pilgrim Centre and Jonas Sonnesyn, the meeting organizer in Trondheim. We now look forward to a GPN meeting next June in Ise in Japan hosted by Jinja Honcho, the Association of Shinto Shrines. This will mark the rebuilding of the two great shrines of Ise which make up the most important Shinto complex in Japan.

There's a [Scottish pilgrimage gathering](#) event in Dumfermline on 27th September, a meeting at Canterbury cathedral on the 14 and 15 October and Friends of the Earth Middle East hold their 'Rehabilitation of the Jordan River: A Commitment of Faith Conference' in Jordan in November.

Please let us know your news and activities, with links if possible.

The swifts take off!

We adopted the swifts at our Trondheim meeting as a symbol of the Green Pilgrimage Network. Please tell us whether there are swifts that make their home in the religious buildings of your pilgrim city.

Swifts are wonderful examples of the everyday miracles of travel and journeys. And powerful reminders of our connection with and responsibility for nature, creation and each other.

In the next few weeks, swifts will be leaving their summer nesting sites in the north and making their annual “pilgrimage” to their winter-feeding territories in the skies above Africa. We wish them well on their journey southward and close with a new prayer at ‘*Celebration of the Journey of the Pilgrims*’ which opened our meeting in Trondheim.

I’ll always remember how, as we joined together in front of Nidaros Cathedral to mark our commitment to this planet we all heard a screeching, and looked up, and there were the swifts. You can read a special meditation on the pilgrimage of the swifts [here](#).

Thanks!

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