

Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1a

History: Religions and Conservation – some milestones

1961 – World Wildlife Fund set up in Switzerland by eminent biologists and others. The aim of this secular organisation was for worldwide action to prevent wild animals being driven to extinction by hunting and the destruction of habitats.

1980 – Having extended the focus of its work to include the wider implications of human activities on the environment, the WWF joins with the World Conservation Union and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) to launch the World Conservation Strategy. This warns that humanity has no future unless nature and natural resources are conserved and also introduces the concept of sustainable development: living within the limits of the natural environment without compromising the needs of future generations.

1986 – WWF celebrates its 25th anniversary with a conference in Assisi, Italy, called by HRH Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh in his role as President of WWF International. The conference brings together leaders from five major faiths (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam) to clarify their respective teachings on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. The Assisi Declarations are published. WWF continues to work with religions and, over the next nine years, a further four religions – Bahá'ísm, Daoism, Jainism and Sikhism – are added to the original five.

1995 - Religion, Land and Conservation conference arranged in Ohito, Japan, with six major religions represented (Bahá'ísm, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam) as well as environmental scientists and activists. The Ohito Declaration is published, stating ten interfaith principles of environmental ethics and recommending ten forms of action for religious leaders and communities to promote conservation and the care of the natural world.

1995 – As a result of ongoing work by the WWF and its religious advisors, HRH Prince Philip decides to create a new, independent organisation to co-ordinate this aspect of environmentalism. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation is launched at a conference in Windsor, UK, with representatives from nine religious faiths as well as from the World Bank and BBC World Service.

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2000 – The original nine faiths having been joined by two more – Shintoism and Zoroastrianism – ARC and WWF co-ordinate a major international event in Nepal with conservation bodies and charitable foundations joining religious leaders. The conference highlights 26 'Sacred Gifts For A Living Planet', each one a distinct piece of action carried out by a faith community to effectively address an environmental issue, ranging from climate change to marine conservation, from sustainable forest management to environmental advocacy.

2002 – A further 14 Sacred Gifts are added to the list of achievements.

2007 – Recognising that religious organisations either manage or influence around 7-8% of the world's habitable surface, a Faith and Forestry meeting in Visby, Sweden, achieves unanimous agreement among participating religious organisations to create an International Religious Forestry Standard, ensuring that millions of hectares of forests worldwide will be managed sustainably.

2009 – Reflecting the growth in religion-based environmental activism worldwide and the increasing number of religious groups identifying this aspect of their teachings, HRH Prince Phillip calls another conference in Windsor, UK under the banner 'Many Heavens, One Earth'. A total of 31 faith traditions are represented and, in the presence of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, launch their Long Term Commitments for a Living Planet, seven-year plans for action to protect the living planet.

2011 – For its 25th anniversary, ARC convenes the Sacred Land celebration and conference in Assisi, Italy. As well as reflecting on the thousands of pieces of environmental action worldwide the organisation has supported, Sacred Land launches the Green Pilgrimage Network. This is an alliance of 12 major pilgrimage destinations committed to addressing the carbon footprint created by the millions of devotees making the journey to sacred sites and, eventually, to make it a positive environmental gain. ARC estimates that around 150 million people a year undertake some kind of pilgrimage, making their collective environmental impact highly significant.