

Hello from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation

I am delighted to be able to tell you that the first full “Seven Year Plan” in the ARC-UN Programme has now been created... although because eight is an auspicious number in China, the Chinese Daoists’ environment plan for generational change will span eight years rather than seven.

The draft Plan (which can be read [here](http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=382) (<http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=382>) in Chinese and English) was created at the end of October by an astonishing conference of 69 senior Daoist monks and nuns from all over the country who met at the sacred mountain of Mao Shan, close to the ancient capital of Nanjing.

ARC and our key sponsor EMF had helped host two Daoist ecological meetings before, but this was the first such meeting of monks and nuns from right across China, and it was full of lively discussions and stories, with plenty of practical comparisons of what had worked best at different temples.

For example, since the first Daoist Ecology meeting in 2006 more than half of the temples that participated have installed solar panels as a direct result of the discussions, and on the way to Mao Shan for example, all the road lighting is solar. So many of the abbots were interested in learning more about the finances and other practical considerations or including solar light and heat in every new build in the future.

Another deeply practical recommendation in the Eight Year Plan deals with the oppressive pall of incense smoke that forms around many temples during holidays. Many people believe that the more boxes of incense they burn, the more devout they are, but monks and nuns are now suggesting a “three stick per person” policy. The first stick representing the One that is The Way, the second representing the two that are the yin and yang, and the third represents heaven, earth and humanity which all have to be held in balance ecologically as well as theologically, if the universe is to thrive.

In support of this was a speech by Master Liu Sichuan of Purple Cloud Daoist temple in Guangzhou.

“I get up at 6.30 in the morning and practice Tai Chi,” he said. “And today, thanks to the practice of protecting the environment in my temple, there are more birds than before, and I feel very happy. There is more green around my temple than elsewhere now, and there is less smoke than before. The smoke used to be intense, but now the air is cleaner.”

Some of the proposals were deeply Daoist – including a pledge to try and incorporate environmental considerations and stories more centrally into the traditional cosmic dances of Daoism in which monks and nuns follow the pattern of the constellations as they move. Other proposals were inspired by the works and ideas of other faiths: for example one of the plans is to initiate youth camps in natural surroundings, inspired by some of the success stories of Christian and Jewish youth camps around the world.

Another exciting element of this new plan is the fact that so many government representatives were present – not just from local government, but also from senior echelons of the central government, including Guo Wei, director general of the Foreign Affairs Department of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, PRC, who had arrived from Beijing with two colleagues, and who spoke about the Daoist scheme with huge enthusiasm.

UNDP's Assistant Secretary General, Olav Kjørven, was one of the keynote speakers at the Daoist meeting in China – and he wrote a moving [blog](http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=276) (<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=276>) about his impressions, which has been published on the UN website as part of the [UN Dispatch Series](http://www.undispatch.com/archives/2008/11/taoism_-_guidi.php) (http://www.undispatch.com/archives/2008/11/taoism_-_guidi.php) and which yesterday was the lead article on the Yale [Forum on Religion and Ecology](http://fore.research.yale.edu/information/index.html) (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/information/index.html>) newsletter.

It is a thoughtful introduction to why this meeting was potentially transformative, and why the UNDP is, in one way, getting involved with the faiths for the first time in its mission to help protect the natural environment, and address climate change.

But I would like to end this November newsletter by giving you an extract from the speech that Dr Kjørven gave at the meeting itself – because it is a reminder not only of how each one of us who is engaging with these issues, has our own special, personal reason for doing so. But also, in his analogy between climate change and lack of balance, it is a reminder how in their ancient teachings, faiths sometimes have the perfect metaphor for things that matter today.

“My grandfather was a farmer, and by Norwegian standards he had quite a large farm. He had about 20 cows, about 10 pigs and exactly 8 children. He was quite successful: he grew crops, and he had streams and forests on his land as well. And when he grew older he started to take care of his grandchildren like me.

And he would take me out in the fields and he would explain to me how one could get more out of the land, increase one's crops, get more milk out of the cows and so on. But he would also explain to me how everything in his agricultural productivity depended on nature and on the gifts that nature gave in the form of clean water, the forests and the wildlife and he explained to me that if we didn't take care of nature, we wouldn't have a future as farmers either. □□

And he would often sit down with me on a tree trunk and then he would open the Bible and read something that taught us about the importance of taking care of creation, and our responsibility to one another as well as to nature. So for my grandfather the work that he did and the worship that he did, and the stewardship of nature were one and the same...

Many of you have heard of the common challenge we are facing around the world: that of climate change. Because of the way we utilize energy and organize our economies around the world we are in danger of severely disrupting the balance of the climate, which conditions everything around us.

But what is climate change in its most simplistic scientific sense? It is all about the balance of carbon – a component in our natural system which makes life possible. It is about the balance of the carbon that exists in the air, in atmosphere that surrounds us on the one hand and the carbon in the earth and living things on the other. And what we have been busily doing as humanity – particularly in the rich countries, but also increasingly in other countries around the world including China – is to disrupt that balance and move a lot of carbon out of the earth and into the clouds. This is familiar to you, I think because if this is anything at all it is the disruption of the balance between the yin and the yang.

And I think that your tradition as Daoists in China – your expression of the yin and the yang and how it relates to our existence as human beings – expresses better than any other religious tradition that I know of the challenge that we are facing when it comes to environmental degradation and climate change. Not even my grandfather could have come up with such a powerful expression.” Read the full speech [here](http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=381) (<http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=381>).

Next time, I'll let you know about a creative, inspirational ecological initiative being led by Buddhist monks in the centre of Mongolia, and also about a new Seven Year Plan being put together by Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere - with an update from Christian groups about their thoughts for making Advent, in the four weeks to Christmas in December, an ecological festival of waiting and thinking.

With best wishes,

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)
<http://www.arcworld.org>