RFS Programme Initiatives

Theologies of the Forest
Written theologies are being developed, of land in general and of forests specifically, to explore how faiths view forests, their role in protecting or being protected by the forests, and how they manage forests.

Commercial forests & ethical purchasing
This initiative helps faith groups to manage their commercial forestry lands according to religious, environmental, social and economic values; increase their ethical investment in commercial forestry; encourage ethical purchasing policies for sustainably harvested (or recycled) wood and paper products.

Tree planting in Africa
Faith groups are involved in one of the largest global tree planting efforts ever. ARC is working with Christian and Islamic leaders from across Africa to help restore degraded lands and conserve critical watersheds, assist communities with their livelihoods and link with the emerging carbon market to address climate change.

Mapping religious forest sites
Working with Oxford University’s Biodiversity Institute, ARC will help the faiths document religious forest sites, to show why religious groups should be recognised as key stakeholders in forest conservation and to map where they fall within areas of high biodiversity.

Documenting and encouraging best practices
Faith groups around the world are among the greatest stewards of forests and forest resources. ARC is helping to identify and share these best practices of sustainable forestry management and protection.

Sacred forests and biodiversity
A joint ARC-WWF report Beyond Belief found that sacred groves are some of the oldest forms of forest protection in the world. In Cambodia, Buddhist monks are protecting the nation’s biggest community forest and in 2010 won the esteemed United Nations Equator Prize. Monks ordain the trees (right) to confer protection on them.

About ARC
The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) is a secular organisation, founded by Prince Philip in 1995, that helps the world’s major religions to develop environmental programmes based on their core teachings, beliefs and practices. It also helps secular environment groups work with the faiths to protect the natural world.

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The paper used in this leaflet comes from FSC-certified woodlands
Religious Forest Sites programme

ARC is working with religious groups around the world to help them manage forests in ways that are in line with religious values and beliefs, and to ensure international recognition of the spiritual, cultural, economic and conservation value of religious forest.

Faiths own approximately 5% of the world’s forests and influence far more in terms of use and management. This ranges from large commercial forest holdings, sacred forests and groves, commercial forestry investments, community forests and areas targeted for tree planting.

Faith views and practices around forests have an enormous impact on the state of the world’s forests, yet this powerful role has been overlooked by both secular and faith groups alike.

The RFS programme aims to:

- Increase international recognition of religious forest sites and their global value, and of religious groups as integral to the forest;
- Improve the integrity, management and protection of religious forest sites through links to a broad coalition of religious groups and environmental experts and other partners who can help them develop management plans, communicate ideas of best practices and deliver key training and other support;
- Create a better understanding, through theologies of the land and forest, of traditional relationships with forests and the faith teachings underpinning conservation action;
- Develop unique, faith-consistent models of good forest relationships and management that can influence how others manage their forests;
- Give voice to the faiths on forest policy.

What is a ‘Religious Forest Site’?

A Religious Forest Site is any forested area owned or influenced by faith groups. These include small and large commercial holdings, community-managed forests, areas targeted for tree planting programmes, sacred forests that are of spiritual significance, and even rare trees maintained in churchyards. There are four main criteria for managing Religious Forest Sites:

- Religiously compatible – based on the faith’s own values, beliefs, heritage and traditions.
- Environmentally appropriate – ensuring any harvest of timber and non-timber products, as well as the care of sacred areas, maintains the forest’s biodiversity, productivity and ecological processes. Also, that those who manage the forest pay attention to environmental concerns, including recycling and pollutants.
- Socially beneficial – helping local people, as well as wider society to enjoy long-term benefits from these places.
- Economically viable – managing forest operations to be sufficiently profitable, but not at the unreasonable cost of the forest, the ecosystem or affected communities.

Faiths protecting forests

Christian and Muslim groups across Africa are planting millions of trees over the next decade. For example, the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania is planting 8.5 million trees on Mount Kilimanjaro over the next seven years. And Muslims across Uganda are uniting to plant millions of trees to address environmental degradation.

Some of Ethiopia’s last and most biodiverse forests, surviving in around 35,000 fragments of woodland across the country, belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Photographs right and above: Victoria Finlay, ARC

Shinto shrines (right) protect some of Japan’s most ancient forests, dwelling place of the kami, the nation’s deities.

Right: Ise Grand Shrine, Japan, by Ajari

Planting trees in Senegal, by Dorothy Voorhees

The Maronite Church in Lebanon has publicly pledged to protect the sacred Harissa Forest (left), recognised as one of the Mediterranean’s biodiversity hotspots.

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