“It is important to know that we are all human world citizens and belong to this fragile, limited space. If we go too far, we can’t repair it.”

Somali Environmentalist: Fatima Jibrell

Understanding Heritage

Immigration Stories - Chapter One

THE GIFT: from my grandfather
Mahatma Ghandi

New Book

A Call to Care

Faith and Climate Change

WINNER: SHAP AWARD 2011
Scattered in almost 20 nations, the 30 million Sikh population believe in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and the rich traditions of Sikh history which describes the Sikhs as pioneers in environmental work, the hard workers and the ones who thrive for the wellbeing of all, we say sarbat da bhala. Punjab is the homeland of Sikhs where EcoSikh invests the majority of its energy and focus towards its ecological revival through behaviour change in the community worldwide.

Launched at Windsor Castle in 2009, EcoSikh is the Sikh community’s contribution to the UN and Alliance of Religions and Conservation (UNARC) Seven Year Plan for a generational change project. It has been helping the global community of Sikhs to connect all that it has been doing since then, whilst enabling new paths to be forged towards creating sustainable traditions and lifestyles.

EcoSikh has been able to connect thousands of Sikh families through its most revered project the World Sikh Environment Day which has been celebrated since 2011 during the week of March 14th. The date, 14th March, is significant as it is the enthronement day of Seventh Guru, Sri Har Rai, who has been remembered in Sikh history for his deep sensitivity towards nature. There are so many important stories of the Guru that are being used to inspire eco-action – one of these stories is that he inadvertently damaged a rose bush when he was a child, and from then on he dedicated his entire life in conservation projects; he created 52 gardens, opened a wild-life reserve and a herbal medicine centre at Kiratpur Sahib. EcoSikh has designed its unique educational programme to share this important piece of history to the people of faith.

World Sikh Environment Day is now celebrated in 16 countries via thousands of Gurdwaras, educational institutions, social groups and organizations who have been taking action through religious discourses, seminars, bicycle rallies, trash clean-up and plantation drives, organic langar, flower shows, children activities, environmental exhibitions, workshops and much more. The revival of the historical Naulakha garden of Kiratpur Sahib, and Guru Ka Bagh at Nabha Sahib, are two important pointers as to how this event is shaping mindsets.
THE WORD “ORGANIC” THEN BECAME POPULARIZED, AND INITIATED DEBATE AGAINST PESTICIDE LADEN FOOD BEING SERVED AT OTHER GURDWARAS

Additionally, along with our partner organization Vigaas Foundation, we have produced a short (36-minute) environmental movie, “A Little Gardener”. This movie has been screened in over 100 gurdwaras and schools and inspired thousands of people to partake in environmental action plan introduced by EcoSikh.

In March 2015, a major news item broke that Sri Harmandar Sahib, (the Golden Temple) had started serving organic langar (free food served at Gurdwaras). This magnificent outcome of EcoSikh’s “Organic Langar” campaign was well received by the holiest shrine, and then by the community worldwide. The word “organic” then became popularized, and initiated debate against pesticide laden food being served at other Gurdwaras: this was primarily instigated to promote pesticide free food and support organic farmers. Now many Gurdwaras serve organic food on special events like Baisakhi and Sikh Environment Day though the apex Sikh organization SGPC; the organisation that manages the major historical Gurdwaras and started organic farming on 12 acres of its land in Amritsar, using the produce at Harmandar Sahib’s free kitchen.

It is a fact that the cultures and religious traditions are being affected by 21st century life-styles and rising consumerism.

The traditional langar system is witnessing extensive use of Styrofoam plates and plastic cutlery in serving food in the Gurdwaras, and in the religious processions called Nagar Kirtans. This is harming the health of the planet and human health as well, and affecting the Sikh carbon footprint on earth. Our campaigns notably addressed the issue where Gurdwaras in Maryland, New Jersey, Ludhiana and many others switched back to steel plates to serve food.

Many of the Sikh Gurus have been known to have meditated under trees, and there are so many Gurdwaras named after a tree. The seventh Guru especially has stories of training his followers to become high skilled gardeners, and creating Kirtipur Sahib as city of gardens. Today, parts of the world are facing threats from global warming and rising temperatures and our campaigns are resulting in stunning action by the community; “eco” Sikhs are seen planting trees in the many villages and cities of Punjab and other parts of India, in the forests of Maryland, Nairobi, Hong Kong, Derby and many other parts of the world. They are switching to energy efficient LED lights, kitchen gardening, and organizing special environmental workshops at the Gurdwaras to train the young children as eco-warriors, and creating special ways to present a planet-friendly lifestyle as a Sikh lifestyle. And all this is being done as a part of their spiritual duty, and to pay tribute to the seventh Guru, Sri Guru Har Rai.

As a faith inspired environmental non-profit organization, EcoSikh has been promoting Sustainable Developmental Goals of the UN, and enhancing the traditions of sewa, langar; our festivals, faith practices, education from a sustainability point of view.

Well! This is the role that a faith needs to play in shaping behaviour to combat climate change.

EcoSikh connects Sikh values, beliefs, and institutions to the most important environmental issues facing our world. We draw on the rich tradition of the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh history to shape the behaviour and outlook of Sikhs and the world, ensuring that our deep reverence for all creation remains a central part of the Sikh way of life.

Also see:
- Trailer A Little Gardener: https://youtu.be/qG4obmNss5Y
- Gurbani on nature: http://www.ecosikh.org/inspiration/gurbani/

From the press:
- Sikh Environment Day reached 2 million people in 15 countries and 21 states this year
- World’s Largest Community Kitchen at Golden Temple Will Now Serve Organic Langar
Why do I Care?

The major issue is human greed, stupidity, violence and arrogance.

I first started working on what we now call climate change issues in the early 1990's after the World Council of Churches (WCC) highlighted the disappearing lands of Pacific Islanders. These Christian islanders had come to the once every seven years General Assembly of the WCC to tell other Christians of the way the sea level was rising and washing away the ancestral burial grounds of the people. I found their personal stories deeply moving and began working with groups such as the now called Interfaith Power and Light movement in the USA, seeking to address these issues through, amongst other things, supporting the use of alternative energy in faith buildings.

I attended my first COP (Conference of the Parties) meeting in Amsterdam in 2000 as an official member of the Mongolian delegation because we were working with the Mongolian Buddhists on eco-building of temples, and on their programmes supporting a more ecological outlook in Mongolia specifically, and throughout North Asian Buddhism generally. For example, this focused on recovering and restoring traditional ways of building not just temples, but also houses, in Mongolia which were supremely energy efficient.

I have turned down invitations to every COP meeting since because, frankly, they are not fit for purpose – or certainly were not until the Paris COP which began to change the overall approach. More on that later.

Sadly, over these last almost thirty years I have watched as 'climate change' has distorted the environmental movement almost beyond recognition. I say distorted because it has come to so dominate the environmental discourse that all other issues - marine life, forests, agriculture, species etc - have been relegated by it, and can often now only be justified for action if a climate change element can be proved.

The dramatic, if not at times hysterical, outpourings of politicians, environmentalists and, occasionally, religious leaders, have only added to the confusion.

Climate change is not the major issue because climate change is the consequence of something far deeper, far more profound and far more difficult. And that is that we have put humanity at the centre of the meaning of life, and have made all else - everything else in Creation - subservient to us. The major issue, therefore, is human greed, stupidity, violence and arrogance.

Climate change is a manifestation of these deeper issues and unless and until we actually start to address these by establishing the right relationship with God – however we might understand that word – with our neighbour, with ourselves and with the whole of Creation, we will make no real long term difference to climate change, nor to protecting or living in balance with the rest of Creation.

Don't get me wrong. Climate change is a profoundly serious threat and challenge. But if we only seek to address it in isolation to the much more challenging examination of what we think we are - what rights we have, and what role we can play - we will fail to address its cause and only attend to its effects. We will have only dealt with the wounds not with what is causing the wounds.
...many of the faiths questioned the very assumption that life could go on but just required a little tweaking...

Let me give you an example. ARC (Alliance of Religion and Conservation) is the official partner with the UN (United Nations) in developing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These have been created as much in response to climate change as to any other key issue such as poverty, education, health etc. When we brought together the major faiths to debate and discuss with the UN the SDGs at the Bristol meeting in 2015, the UN was somewhat taken aback. I think they had expected the faiths to simply say “Well Done”, agree to support them, and generally give them a pat on the back.

Some did, but some did not. From Islam, from Daoism, from Hinduism and from the Shinto came a series of challenges. Why, they asked, was the only economic model assumed by the SDGs that of consumerist capitalism? And why was the SDGs basically attempting to make the impact of this consumerist capitalism a bit less destructive – for example in the field of climate change solutions? The uncritical assumption that there is only one viable economic model shocked the faiths, as it is primarily this economic model which is driving us down the road of loss of bio-diversity, and the destruction of forests. It is this concept of ‘sustainable development’ which ignores the cost to the environment and the pursuit of happiness, which means we feel we can take what we want from nature – so how can it also save us? The faiths offered a range of alternative economic models which divorced the greed and self-centredness of consumerism from the need for serious development of education, health, the tackling poverty, the resolving of conflict and so forth.

In other words, many of the faiths questioned the very assumption that life could go on but just required a little tweaking. They saw climate change and all the other issues as being the manifestations of wrong relationships, wrong economic models and indeed in many cases wrong understanding of the place and role of humanity within the great Story of Life itself.

The word ‘story’ is also important. We are a story-telling species. Our great faiths have continued from generation to generation over hundreds, indeed thousands of years by telling stories. These stories range from our sacred texts to the lives of saints, gurus and teachers as well as contemporary stories which highlight faith truths about who we are. Yet it has only been in the last couple of years that the climate change movement has begun to discover this for themselves. We have been bombarded with data for over twenty years and frankly it has had very little impact on the vast majority of people. Entire academic empires have been built upon the quest for data about this critical issue and this has been like a small pebble falling into a lake.

Back in 1986 HRH The Duke of Edinburgh caused controversy in the environmental world. He was the International President of the World Wide Life Fund (WWF) at that time and at a planning meeting to celebrate WWF’s 25th anniversary he said “If the environmental crisis was a crisis of data, of information, it would be over now. The fact is that data does not change hearts and minds. Only two things have done that throughout history – the Arts and faith”. So saying, he suggested that WWF should meet with the major faiths to explore how the insights, wisdom and authority could be partners with the major conservation/environmental organisations. This resulted in the first ever such meeting between major faiths and the main environmental organisations at Assisi, Italy. It achieved the largest press coverage of any WWF event before or since. The movement needed our stories and our wisdom.
Data is only as important as the context within which it is used. To quote Mark Twain, there are “lies, damned lies and statistics”. Data is used within specific contexts which colour what the numbers mean. It is therefore ridiculous to talk of data as neutral because it never is. However, because we have created a culture which likes to pretend that data is neutral, we have pushed narrative into the far background or denied its validity at all. Yet all information is narrated so it is vital to understand the narratives themselves to really appreciate what is going on.

The faiths know this and have the ability to narrate the true nature of our crises, which facts and figures can enhance but not reveal.

For example, Daoism. When the UN held its first formal meeting with the Daoists of China in 2008, it was a year before the disastrous Copenhagen COP which many already knew was not going to work for all sorts of reasons. At the Daoism meeting the UN tried to explain with graphs, data, predictions etc what climate change meant. The blank looks on many faces told us all that this was not working until one of the most senior Daoists rose and said: “It is our belief that the universe is composed of two opposite, often in conflict, occasionally in harmony natural forces. Yin and yang. Yin is the earthly, cold, wet, feminine element while yang is the heavens and stars, male, hot and dry. These two have to be balanced and our role as human beings is to help keep that balance. It is the basis of all Daoist ritual and teachings. So let us put this as we would in Daoism. Carbon fuels are yin – earthly. When we burn them they become gases, yang, and ascend to the sky. This means the fundamental balance of yin and yang is thrown out of kilter, and we as humanity have failed to fulfil our role as those who maintain the balance. This means that burning fossil fuels is against the Dao.”

That one speech did more in a few minutes to explain within a Greater Daoist Story, a meaningful narrative, the issues that lie behind climate change as a manifestation of a wrong relationship with nature, than any UN document. And it has been quoted hundreds of times by the UN itself.

In 2015 ARC was asked by the then President of France, Francois Hollande, if we would convene a gathering of religious leaders prior to the Paris COP and as the President said “Get them all to issue a challenge to the political leaders”. We said no we wouldn’t because at every COP for the last fifteen years or more, religious leaders have ‘spoken out’, have ‘written demanding action’ etc. And no-one has paid the slightest bit of attention. Most COPs generate over 10,000 petitions to political leaders so you can imagine how many actually get read. Instead we suggested that we, with the President, invite key religious leaders who had actually done things, significant things within their own faiths, to address environmental issues including climate change. No point in having people who say one thing but have failed to do anything themselves about it. We also invited artists, philosophers, humanists, craftspeople to join us and we asked each one to come answering one question. Not how do we make other people do what we want, but to answer honestly “Why do I care?”. The event – the Summit of Conscience – was a huge success and from this President Hollande asked us to craft a letter which he sent a few weeks prior to the Paris COP. The letter said:

By their nature, COPs offer an opportunity to meet and talk at the highest level. They also offer an opportunity to undertake decisive steps to tackle climate change; but as we all know that opportunity is beset by challenges.

2015 is a dramatic year for making key choices for Humanity: we need to reinvent how we tackle the major challenges that face us and our planet. This calls for new ways of living and acting.

This calls for real honesty at every level, and it is vital that it starts here, among those deeply involved at the level of leaders of national delegations, NGOs, the scientific community, civil society...

So as you prepare to come to Paris we would like to ask you to think about your personal role, and answer a simple, but profound, question: “Why do I care?” Your response might be very personal – the influence of a parent, child or grandparent; the influence of culture or personal beliefs; the influence of a transformative experience of the wonder and beauty of nature; a crisis in your life which brought you back to core values.

In our contemporary world it is very rare that we are asked to talk about what lies at the heart of our actions. Instead we hide behind statistics, data, policy statements etc, few of which actually touch other people’s hearts and minds.

In telling the story of “Why do I care”, you will be joining millions around the world, including the example set recently by His Holiness The Pope, in making climate change and the protection of our beautiful planet a personal issue of our own beliefs and values.

Why are we asking you to do this? Because we hope that in answering this question, you will come to the COP primarily as a conscious human being not just as a representative of a Government or agency.

In the end the most important element of this is that we hear from you as a person, a member of the human family who has for a time a uniquely significant role to play in protecting the world.

The result of this totally different, story based, personal beliefs and values centered appeal was that over a quarter of those coming replied. Their answers are of course confidential, but it was this group who were prepared to go the extra mile and to broker and compromise, cut and deal in order that a Paris Agreement could be achieved. In other words it was only when this became personal and about what motivates each person that the data had a context within which to work.

As faiths we have sometimes given up our own wealth of understanding, our own stories in order to seem relevant to the secular world. This is usually a mistake because only through stories can we change hearts and minds. Only by being true to our own traditions at their best can we be of real help to our world. And only by remembering that climate change is a manifestation of what some faiths call sin, others karma, and yet others going against the Dao, can we really speak - not the data and science - but to the souls of those who in the end need to change and change dramatically.
In Service to Mother Earth

Through our work we have been able to inspire and mobilise countless Hindus worldwide to increase their love and care for Mother Earth.

In the 70 years since Indian independence, Hindu populations have grown significantly beyond the borders of India. We now find sizeable Hindu communities all over the world, most notably in North America, Europe, South East Asia, Africa, and Australasia. This spread of Hindu cultures means that Hindus are now more involved in global issues, and share more responsibility to work together towards solutions. This requires new thinking about the role and application of Hindu principles in a global context — about offering dharmaic proposals to global discourse and action.

A major step towards a more globally engaged Hinduism was the launch of the Bhumi Project at the Windsor Celebration of the Faith Commitments for a Living Planet in November 2009, organised by Alliance of Religions and Conservation. The Project was conceived to educate, inspire, inform and connect Hindus interested in service to Mother Earth. The project is aptly named after Bhumi Devi, a Sanskrit name for the personality of Mother Earth, famed in Indian literature.

The Project is a joint initiative between the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS) and GreenFaith - a multi-faith environmental organisation based in United States. This partnership allows the Project to draw upon world-class Hindu scholarship from the OCHS which then informs cutting-edge environmental leadership training and campaigns with GreenFaith.

Since the launch of the Project in 2009 we have engaged with Hindu leaders, temples, and communities across the world to address a range of environmental concerns, such as climate change, pollution, and wildlife conservation.

From 2010 – 2014 we worked extensively with a number of major Hindu temples, places of worship and pilgrimage in India. This work consisted of engaging religious leaders, community activists, local NGOs and governments. Sites where we worked included Rishikesh, Varanasi, Vrindavana, Puri, and Dwarka. During this time we also initiated tiger and lion conservation projects in India, looking to minimise the effects of religious pilgrimage in wildlife sensitive zones. A major outcome of this work was a publication entitled the 'Green Temples Guide'. This handbook detailed how Hindu religious institutions could be more environmentally friendly over seven thematic areas.

In 2015 our work took on a more international tone in the lead up to the Paris climate negotiations, COP21. The Bhumi Project was invited to work with other leading faith-based environmental organisations to advocate for a strong climate treaty. In July of 2015 we helped convene an international climate change leadership training in Rome, Italy. This gathering brought together 100 young religious leaders from across the world for an opportunity to develop the skills needed to become change-makers in their local communities. Of the 100 attendees, 15 were from Hindu backgrounds; they had come from India, the US, UK and Fiji. This was the first time that so many Hindu climate activists had come together for a faith-based climate event. Later in 2015 we issued the Hindu Declaration on Climate Change. Written by an international team, the Declaration was endorsed by over 70 major Hindu institutions and leaders from across the world - the highest ever for a Hindu climate statement.

In addition to our environmental work, we have engaged considerably with the United Nations. Prior to the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) we were invited to offer a formal response by the UN on how the international Hindu community could help implement the Goals; these formed part of the Bristol Faith Commitments. In late 2017 we participated in the launch of the Zug Faith Guidelines, where we contributed guidelines for how Hindus could invest for sustainable development through impact investing.

During 2018 and 2019 we will be participating in a major international campaign on renewable energy solutions for India and Africa. We will also be a founding partner for GreenFaith India – the first multi-faith climate change initiative in the country. We will continue to build upon the considerable partnerships we have developed in the US by offering climate change leadership workshops for Hindu students at a number of major universities, including Georgetown, Princeton and Yale.

Through our work we have been able to inspire and mobilise countless Hindus worldwide to increase their love and care for Mother Earth. As the climate crises intensifies over the coming years and decades, Hindu leaders and communities will have an increasingly important role to play in caring for the natural world. The Bhumi Project is honoured and humbled to play a role in that work.