News Letter December 2013

There’s plenty to celebrate and reflect on as we look back on this year’s activity in the Green Pilgrimage Network. And much to look forward to also in 2014, with gatherings of various sizes planned in Japan, Malaysia, Sweden and Palestine, and a new website as well.

POLYBAGS AND BOTTLES

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HINDU CELEBRATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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NEWS IN BRIEF

POLYBAGS AND BOTTLES

Last time we sent out an article on the problems GPN members are having with getting rid of plastics, polybags (and most memorably flipflops in the Indian pilgrimage town of Puri) and asked for your comments and experiences. Nandini Tripathi from Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, northern India, says that polybags have recently been included in road construction programmes in India. And she also sent us an example of an original way that plastic bottles are being used in building homes in Latin America, Nigeria and elsewhere, and also greenhouses.
If you link to this article from Inspiration Green, you will see how people are collecting plastic and glass bottles in clean-up drives or from landfill, filling them with sand, and using them as construction materials for walls.

Plastic’s proved to be a remarkably good insulator, and a usefully strong material. It’s also attractive. Walls made with plastic bottles can support heavy roofs, which is a good thing, particularly if the roof is an eco one, with soil and grass weighing up to 30 tons in wet weather, as you can see in the house in Honduras built from bottles, shown on the previous page. I’m attaching a guide, from REAM Scotland, on how to make your own plastic bottle greenhouse. If anyone decides to try, do let us know.

India

The India Chapter of the GPN moves ahead, and we hope to host a focus meeting for India pilgrim cities in early 2014, in association with ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability). In preparation for this, ICLEI’s Ramiz Khan is spending some time over the next six months visiting key Indian pilgrim cities including Rishikesh (Hindus), Nanded (Sikhs) and Leh (Buddhists). Except for Leh, which is hard to negotiate until the passes begin to clear in spring, the environmental assessments will be ready by the end of January. The results will be used to develop action plans for greener cities and greener pilgrimage, focusing on practical issues like waste, transport, provision of solar energy and water use.

Hindu Celebration of the Environment

ARC’s sister organization, the Bhumi Project, led by Gopal Patel, is one of the...
partners in GPN India. Last month it was announced that the first ever Hindu Environment Week would be held in February 2014. The planned annual week of celebration and actions is expected to involve thousands of Hindus in communities, schools and temples around the world. The announcement was made in the Green Pilgrimage city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh at a special Bhumi Project event hosted by the Mayor of Varanasi, Ram Gopal Mohale. Proposed events include conferences, exhibitions, and special eco-events in Indian towns and cities including Rishikesh, Mt Abu, Puri, Mumbai, Srinagar and Varanasi. Some places are choosing to launch environmental assessments of their surrounding areas.

**Amritsar green processions**

Every year there are hundreds of Nagar Kirtans (Sikh sacred processions) throughout India to celebrate the major birthdays, martyrdom days and enthronements of Sikh Gurus. But most are not clean or green, and actually involve piles of trash being left on the streets. Often it’s not because people don’t care, it’s just because they haven’t thought about it, or there aren’t the bins or infrastructure. But now, thanks to an initiative by Sikhs in Amritsar and beyond, there’s a solution. In October EcoAmritsar (the group set up by stakeholders and our sister organization EcoSikh) started an initiative to provide rubbish bins and information to stall-holders, as well as provide teams of volunteers with EcoAmritsar bands, T-shirts, gloves and rubbish bags (as well as a donated rubbish cart) to clean up. The aim was to leave the streets CLEANER than before the Nagar Kirtan, so the procession was actually a blessing.

If you want to organize a Clean and Green Nagar Kirtan, or see what the green pilgrimage team in Amritsar are up to, so you can be inspired to clean up your own religious procession, then [here’s a page](#) linking to a PDF and a powerpoint.
Greening the Hajj

The Hajj is the largest annual pilgrimage for Muslims, and going on Hajj to Makkah in Saudi Arabia at least once in your life is an important part of being a devout Muslim. Yet as the world gets richer, increasing numbers of people are going to Makkah almost every year, and the desert ecosystem is under pressure. This important pilgrimage is also a strong opportunity for people from all over the Islamic world to learn how important the environmental message is to Islam, and to remember their own responsibility and choices.

A meeting on greening the Hajj is planned for Malaysia next February. Meanwhile, The Green Guide for Hajj, written by Dr Husna Ahmad, has now been translated into Arabic, Hausa and Bahasa Indonesia. Indonesia sends more pilgrims to the Hajj than any other Muslim country. This year 168,000 Indonesian pilgrims went to Makkah. (This year quotas have been reduced because of the work going on at the site)

Working with Universitas Nasional in Indonesia, our colleague, Fachruddin Mangunjaya, has produced a touring road show with an exhibition on Greening the Hajj explaining the steps pilgrims can take towards greening their pilgrimage, from minimizing the use of plastics to planting trees. The first road show started in North Sumatra in early September and was shown to pilgrims and Hajj and Umrah travel agents during the Hajj season departure. In Jakarta, it was shown to over 5,000 Hajj participants before they left for Makkah. In October it moved to Majelis Zikr Azzikra in Bogor, near Jakarta, where 10,000 people saw the exhibition in a 24-hour period.

Fachruddin has created a Green Hajj Facebook page and photostream for pilgrims from Malaysia and Indonesia.
River Jordan

The banks of the Jordan have several baptism sites drawing over 800,000 pilgrims a year. Yet, as we heard at Trondheim, this holy river is starved of water, and is dirty and polluted. Friends of the Earth Middle East River Jordan project joined the GPN as members in Trondheim. In November they held a meeting for faith leaders in Jordan to launch the Jordan River Covenant which condemns the degradation of the Jordan River and has the vision of a healthy, living river. They produced three source books for educators and community leaders to use on water, ecology and the Jordan River in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. ARC’s Islamic Advisor, Dr Husna Ahmad helped compile the resource book for Muslim visitors (taking as her starting point the quote from the Qu'ran that “We made from water every living thing”) and attended the launch. “I think what I take away with me from the experience is the great hospitality of the Jordanian people. Also in terms of Friends of the Earth Middle East, the sense that despite all the resistance to their work they have overcome so many obstacles and are really making steps even if very small steps towards peace in the region. There were people from Palestine and Israel’s Parliament, the Knesset, who were genuinely interested in building bridges and appreciating the 'other'.

“One positive piece of news that came out at the conference (and which FOEME have been fighting for over the past 10 years) is the release of water into the Jordan river from Israel, as the Israel Water Authority will begin to allow water to flow regularly from Lake Kinneret into the Lower Jordan River for the first time. Also the National Mine Clearance authority in Jordan will start removing landmines from alongside a 30 km stretch of the river. Which will mean that the public will have access to parts of the river currently closed off.

Dr Husna said that what kept coming up in the conference was how the international community put pressure on their governments to take the issue of rehabilitation of the Jordan River seriously. “One beautiful idea that was mooted – and I think will actually be taking place – is the idea of a caravan of religious leaders for the three Abrahamic faiths making their way along the Jordan River next year to raise further awareness”.

She was also moved by news of the three EcoParks created by FoEME, with protected areas for birds and butterflies, and with a Neighbors Path providing safe open spaces for the community. “As more people visit the Ecoparks of FOEME they will recognise the importance to the ecosystem that the River Jordan’s survival will bring,” she predicted.
She has also produced a new cartoon **showing kids how to be Water Heroes**, which will be launched in London in early December.

**Abraham Path**

Not far away, the Abraham Path initiative is a good case study about how to create new paths out of old ones: the team has created a long-distance walking trail across the Middle East. The path retraces the cultural memory of the journey of Abraham and his family and celebrates its story of hospitality and kindness to strangers. The new site covers nearly 400 km of walking trails across more than 30 communities with information on guides, hosts and tour operators. The idea is to remind people of the natural beauty of this region, and “the humble act of walking from community to community which inspires new encounters, new stories and new generosity by travelers and hosts.” Looking at their website, several members of our team were tempted to get up from our computers, stretch, book out of normal life for a month or so and have a green adventure.

You can go online and download maps (including GPS tracks) of the 30 walking segments in seven regions and you can either plan your journey by connecting directly with homestay hosts and or through organized tours. You can read site descriptions of the extraordinary historic places along the route. You can browse photos and videos of the landscape, people, and hospitality you will encounter in villages along the way. And you can hear from other travellers and pilgrims through blogs, testimonies, and press reports.

We think it’s a good example of how to transfer the simple act of pilgrimage to the internet world… and inspire people to walk. If you have other examples of good resources and websites and books, do let us know and we’ll add to our resources section.
A European chapter begins

Since the middle ages, many thousands of pilgrims have gone to Canterbury in Kent, England each year to pray at the shrine of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop who was murdered by followers of the king in 1170, as he was praying inside the Cathedral.

It was an ideal historical place therefore to hold a meeting to discuss forming a European Chapter of the GPN. Canon Caroline Pinchbeck from Canterbury Diocese hosted Rev Dane Sherrard (who has retired from Luss but who will continue to have a leading role in the Scottish green pilgrimage movement, Per Rosenberg from Sweden, Rev Berit Lanke from Trondheim, Canon Kevin Walton from St Albans, leading environmental consultant Chris Baines and myself.

The group will meet again in Vadstena in Sweden in February with the view to having a wider meeting in 2014. Meanwhile we’ll be exploring funding options and joint projects and a website to connect the ancient pilgrimage sites of Europe. We’re excited by the powerful example that this new Chapter could have in Europe, embodying a powerful environmental message. As Thorbjorn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee and previous Prime Minster of Norway reminded us in his keynote speech at our Trondheim meeting:

“Faith goes to the very heart of European society and civilization. Now different religious, different holy sites, yet on the same page, working towards the same goal. This is a valuable lesson for the world. It is an important reminder that despite difficult 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...”
Scotland

There has been Christian pilgrimage in Scotland since 563, when St Columba arrived from Ireland, landing on the three mile-long Island of Iona in the Inner Hebrides, and building a community there. In September this year, exactly 1450 years later, more than 80 people, representing 50 organisations and churches, met in Dunfermline, north of Edinburgh, for the first ever Scottish Pilgrimage Gathering. One of the big questions was whether, and how, pilgrim walking routes can meet a spiritual and cultural need in Scotland today. Rev Andrew Patterson and Rev Richard Frazer helped everyone remember to incorporate a green element in their planning.

News in Brief

We’re working on a new website for the Green Pilgrimage Network that we’ll share next time – starting with something simple, building up. We have a Facebook account that I started this morning, so do LIKE us quickly so there’s a community vibe (glad to see Rajwant Singh, Gopal Patel and Paola Triolo are already friends). And has anyone else discovered the Atlantic Cities news feed? Visit it here and sign up for a weekly newsletter (or there’s a daily one too: they’re fascinating).

All best wishes

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