Seeking partnerships

Secular partnerships to promote this greening process will be sought – from ‘green’ transport providers to solar power experts. Local authorities, academic institutions, environmental organizations and other stakeholders will be encouraged to come into discussion and partnership with religious groups to promote all aspects of greening pilgrimages.

The first pilgrimage cities

The first proposed as Green Pilgrim Cities, following the Muslim example of Medina, are:

- Assisi in Italy for Catholics
- Dwarka in Gujarat, and cities in Braj, UP, India for Hindus
- Haifa in Israel for Baha’is
- Jerusalem in Israel for Christians, Jews and Muslims
- St Etchmiadzin in Armenia for Armenian Orthodox Christians
- Trondheim in Norway for Christians

When will it happen?

The new network will be launched at a meeting at the sacred mountain of Hua Shan in central China, in October 2010, hosted by the Chinese Government and supported by ARC and UNDP. Hua Shan is one of China’s five major sacred Daoist mountains, and a huge centre of pilgrimage

How do we get involved?

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ARC: THE ALLIANCE OF RELIGIONS AND CONSERVATION

Launched in 1995 by HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh KG KT
What will it be?

The vision is of pilgrim cities on all continents, and of each faith:

- Being kind to the earth because it accords with their beliefs;
- Remembering their responsibility to the earth;
- Showing pilgrims how to bring these gentler living ideas home with them;
- Working with local authorities to create sustainable cities worldwide;
- Discussing how to receive and accommodate pilgrims sustainably;
- Putting in sustainable infrastructures;
- Recycling, and introducing better waste management;
- Introducing more low-carbon transport;
- Making it easier to eat ethically;
- Sharing information on greening strategies.

The network will extend its activities to the physical and spiritual preparations for pilgrimage in people’s home towns as well as to the nature of the journey itself.

How did it come about?

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and WWF-International have been working with sacred sites for more than 20 years. This work has ranged from sacred forests and cities in India, through sacred mountains and valleys in China and Mongolia, to pilgrimage routes in the UK and Mexico. In many countries this has also included sacred cities – for example, in Japan, China and the UK.

The latest ARC programme, in co-operation with the United Nations Development Programme, culminated in a major event at Windsor Castle, England, in November 2009. Here nine major world faiths launched significant commitments to environmental action in what the United Nations described as “potentially the world’s largest civil society movement on climate change”.

The Muslim Seven Year Plan, launched by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, included a plan for a network of Al-Kher cities – cities which are “beneficial, wonderful and beautiful”. There are plans to green 10 Muslim cities in the next seven years, including the second holiest city in Islam, Medina in Saudi Arabia, as well as Sale in Morocco and Bogor in Indonesia.

Several faiths also included the idea of green sacred pilgrimage cities in their long term environmental commitments. The Armenian Orthodox Church, for example, proposes to green the holy city of St Etchmiadzin, the spiritual centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Today it is an important pilgrimage place, not only for Armenians worldwide but for thousands of other pilgrims, including Muslims.

Likewise, the Jewish Seven Year Plan to protect the living planet proposes greening Jerusalem so that a city holy to billions of people around the world becomes a model sustainable city.

At the Windsor meeting, a proposal to create an initiative to promote the greening of destination pilgrimage cities was put forward. Inspired by the Muslim plan, the aim is to encourage faiths to green their pilgrimage cities according to their own theology and understanding.

How will it work?

Each faith will now identify the city or cities relevant to them. Leaders will commit to work with their own faith’s cities and also join a network to access and share information, support and technical knowledge with other members. It will be equally important for the Mayor and City Council in each city to commit to the goals of the network.