

Alliance of Religions and Conservation
Religions and the environment: Background information on
Hinduism for pupils (to be used with ARC GCSE lesson plan 2)

Hindu Assisi Declaration, 1986

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Key points

- In the ancient spiritual traditions man was looked upon as part of nature, linked by indissoluble spiritual and psychological bonds with the elements around him. This is... marked in the Hindu tradition. The Vedas... which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, reflect an encompassing world view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power.
- The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present is not seen as something apart from the earth and its multitudinous life forms.
- Not only in the Vedas but also in later scriptures such as the Upanishads, the Puranas and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation but expresses itself through natural phenomena.
- Numerous Hindu texts advise that all species should be treated as children. According to the Vaishnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolised by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish. ... This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate lesser life forms but rather evolved out of those forms itself. This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life.
- For the Jains, Ahimsa, or non-violence, is the greatest good and on no account should life be taken. This philosophy was emphasised more recently by Mahatma Gandhi ... All this strengthens the attitude of reverence for all life, including animals and insects.
- Forests and groves were considered sacred (by ancient Hindu scriptures) and flowering trees received special reverence. The Mahabharata says that "even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect".
- The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life represents a powerful tradition which needs to be renurtured and reapplied in our present context. What is needed today is to remind

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ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. Centuries of rapacious exploitation of the environment have finally caught up with us and a radically changed attitude towards nature is now not a question of spiritual merit or condescension but of sheer survival. Let us declare our determination to halt the present slide towards destruction, ... and even at this late hour to reverse the suicidal course upon which we have embarked.

You can download the full text of the original Assisi declarations, including the Hindu declaration, at: <http://tinyurl.com/c378tvw>

Hinduism and the environment: Quotations from scriptures and others

“The Earth is our mother and we are all her children” – traditional Hindu saying

“I pervade the Universe. All objects in the Universe rest on me as pearls on the thread of a garland” – Sri Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita

“Fire is his head, his eyes are the moon and the sun; the regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda; the wind is his breath, his heart is the entire universe; the earth is his footstool, truly he is the inner soul of all” – description of the divine in the Mundaka Upanishad

According to the Vaishnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolised by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into human incarnations. This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life forms, but rather evolved out of these forms itself, and is therefore integrally linked to the whole of creation. This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life. The Yajurveda lays down that ‘no person should kill animals helpful to all. Rather, by serving them, one should attain happiness’ (Yajurveda 13:47) – Hindu Declaration on Nature, Assisi 1986, His Excellency Dr Karan Singh

“Even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect” – the Mahabharata

“Every living creature is the son of the supreme Lord, and He does not tolerate even ants being killed” – Bhaktivedanta Swāmī Prabhupada A.C. Purport, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, 14.16

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“There is enough for everyone's need, but not for their greed” – Mahatma Gandhi

“Spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures for the satisfaction of our bodily wants ” – Mahatma Gandhi

“So long as the Earth preserves her forests and wildlife, man’s progeny will continue to exist.’ This is the Hindu approach toward the conservation of ecology” – Swami Vibudhesha Teertha

Hindu Nine Year Plan, 2009-2018

The Hindu Nine Year Plan on the environment was by the Bhumi Project, a collaboration of the largest Hindu temples in the UK (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Neasden; ISKCON Bhaktivedanta Manor, Watford; Sri Balaji Temple, Birmingham; Sri Sanatan Mandir, Leicester) with the Krishna-Avanti Primary School and the National Hindu Students Forum. It was launched at ARC’s Windsor Celebration in November 2009 and is facilitated by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. Its proposals included:

1. A Hindu labelling scheme to apply Hindu standards to a range of products and services
2. Promotion of ahimsa (non-violent) lifestyle to reduce one's impact on the Earth
3. Encourage and provide resources for Hindu temples to use their land to develop gardens and grow produce for use in daily worship
4. Develop cruelty-free dairies based on Hindu principles of animal husbandry
5. Develop resources to advise Hindu temples on how to make celebrations and festivals environmentally friendly
6. Networking with current international conservation projects – for instance cleaning and restoration of the River Ganges in India.
7. Production of an energy efficiency pack for Hindu temples and households, including guidance on constructing new temples.
8. Development of training courses for Hindu priests and devotees on best environmental practice.
9. Research and share stories from the Hindu tradition which relate to the environment.

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Examples of Hindu Environmental Action

Tirumala – a green Hindu temple

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16746656>

It is estimated that more than 150 million people a year undertake some form of spiritually-motivated pilgrimage journey, and popular destinations experience huge demands for water, energy, food and other resources.

The Hindu temple of Lord Venkateshwara in Tirumala, India, receives between 50,000 and 100,000 pilgrims every day and the temple authorities are using their influence and the economic might of some \$340million donations each year to radically restructure local energy use. This strategy has involved establishing wind turbines and massive solar panel installations to provide the energy needed to run the community kitchen.

The kitchen provides free meals for the pilgrims, making as much as 50,000 kilos of cooked rice as well as lentils and vegetables every day, and the shift to renewable energy is estimated to save 500 litres of diesel fuel daily.

Now the temple is encouraging foreign donors to contribute to these green power technologies with the aim of the entire temple town becoming self-sufficient for energy. With India's carbon emissions growing all the time these green fuel initiatives are powerful examples of cleaner development that can even bring in income from carbon offsetting and credits.

Orissa, India – restoring the sacred forests

Working in partnership with local government, Hindu groups are replanting and restoring the sacred forest of Orissa and seeking sustainable ways to use wood for the annual festival parade of chariots.