



Background to the Sacred Land Celebration and ARC

In 1986 a unique event brought leaders from the world's major religions together to consider their faith's role in relation to the environment. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish representatives each prepared declarations reflecting their commitment to the care of the natural world and sowing the seeds for world-wide programmes of environmental action. On October 31, 25 years later, a second gathering at Assisi will take stock of the considerable achievements that have resulted and look forward to further action for a greener future.

Assisi, 1986

In recognition of its own 25th anniversary in September 1986 the then World Wildlife Fund (WWF) organised a week-long celebration in the central Italian town of Assisi. The location was chosen by the WWF International President HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, in recognition of St Francis, the Christian saint renowned for his love and respect for all living things, whose tomb has made Assisi a Christian pilgrimage destination. The aim of the programme was to identify the role that major world religions could play in furthering the cause of environmental conservation, recognising the worldwide significance of religion as a force for education and social change.

During that week in September 1986 the small Italian town was transformed by the arrival of five lively and colourful pilgrimage processions, with costumes and banners reflecting themes of religion and nature and accompanied by a host of musicians and performers. At the same time a group of leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish faiths gathered in retreat to consider the teachings their respective faiths offered about our relationship with the natural world.

The week culminated in a dazzling multi-faith ceremony, rich in music, dance and poetry, representing the different ways in which religious tradition contributed to an overarching commitment to the harmonious stewardship of the natural world. Over 1000 delegates, including scientists, educators, business people and environmentalists, then heard five 'declarations' that had been drawn up during the retreat. Each declaration explaining the sacred responsibilities given to the faithful of each religion to play their individual and collective part in protecting the environment.

ARC

Building on the energy and success of the Assisi conference, WWF launched the Network on Conservation and Religion, a secular sister organisation aiming to promote the links between scientific ecology and the faiths of the world. This Network was eventually reconstituted as the autonomous Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC), a UK-based non-profit agency offering support to programmes of faith-based environmental action worldwide.

ARC was launched by HRH The Prince Philip and representatives of nine world religions at an event in Windsor castle, England in 1995, with a further two religions joining in 2000. ARC now works in partnership with organisations representing the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Daoist,

Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Judaic, Shinto, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths. It also has a strong engagement with the World Bank, the UNDP, the Norwegian Government and others.

Plans & Projects

Since the first Assisi conference the partnership between religions and conservation has led to hundreds of thousands of projects and programmes addressing environmental issues around the world. In 2009 UN Assistant Secretary-General Olav Kjørven described faith action on the environment as: "potentially the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history". A huge range of projects have been developed, including:

- Tanzanian fishermen renouncing the use of dynamite in accordance with Islamic principles;
- Mongolian Buddhists restoring a ban on hunting and logging in sacred mountain and forest sites;
- The Druze in Lebanon dedicating the ecologically fragile Jisr-El-Qadi region in the ancient Chouf valley as a 'Sacred Gift to the Earth', promising to protect it in perpetuity. This is one of some 40 Sacred Gifts worldwide;
- Hundreds of churchyards in the UK becoming thriving eco-systems where birds, reptiles, insects and bats can survive as part of the Living Churchyards project;
- An initiative to map sacred forests and develop an International Religious Forestry Standard that will relate to millions of hectares of forests around the world considered sacred, offering protection according to religious, environmental, social and economic criteria.
- More recently, the development of long-term action plans on the environment by 31 faith traditions (launched at Windsor in 2009) with a further 27 plans currently under development by Christian, Muslim and Hindu faith traditions in sub-Saharan Africa and two more plans to be announced at Assisi at the Sacred Land celebration Oct 31-Nov 2, 2011. The action plans are a powerful list of strategic goals that include initiatives such as:
 - Plans to plant around 50 million trees in Africa in the next seven to 10 years;
 - The greening of church buildings worldwide; for example, all Daoist temples are to be fitted with solar panels;
 - Extensive environmental education programmes delivered through the faiths' formal and informal networks of schools, youth clubs, communities and associations.
- The Green Pilgrimage Network project, to be launched at the Sacred Land Celebration in Assisi, Italy, on October 31-November 2, marks a commitment from the faiths to mitigate the environmental impact of the many millions of religious pilgrims making their way to sacred places. The first set of pilot green pilgrim cities and sacred sites aiming to make a 'positive footprint' includes places sacred to Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs.

Assisi 2011

Marking the 25th anniversary of this extraordinarily productive coming together of faith and the environment, the Assisi 2011 event naturally combines reflection on past achievements with anticipation of challenges to come. Once again presided over by HRH The Prince Philip, around 100 delegates will attend, representing a global reach of nations, faiths and traditions. As in 1986 there will be a sharing of the rich cultures of music, dance, theatre and ritual from the different faith traditions with an opening ceremonial event in the magnificent 13th century Palazzo Monte Frumentario.

This dazzling celebration will mark the beginning of a two-day conference where participants will launch the Green Pilgrimage Network and explore the issues around what makes a sustainable pilgrimage. A Green Hajj guide aimed at some two million Muslims visiting Mecca (Makkah) in Saudi Arabia every year will also be launched at Assisi.

Who is coming?

The event will be attended by HRH The Prince Philip, senior members of UNDP, high ranking Daoist abbots from China, bishops and senior Mongolian, Buddhist, Baha'i, Christian, Daoist, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Shinto clergy and priests, and senior clergy from Assisi including Fr Marco Tasca, minister general of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual and S.E. Mons Domenico Sorrentino, Archbishop of Assisi. Major secular figures from the environmental world include representatives of WWF Italy, UK, USA and International, and USAID, as well as governmental representatives such as the British Ambassadors to Rome and to the Holy See, the Mayor of Assisi, and Federico Rocca, the deputy mayor of Rome.

Why work with the faiths?

Most people around the world adhere to a religion – the faiths reach out to 85 per cent of the world's 6.79 billion people. There are 2.1 billion Christians worldwide; 1.34 billion Muslims; more than 950 million Hindus; 50-70 million Daoists; 24 million Sikhs and 13 million Jews (source: Atlas of Religion, published by Earthscan, 2007). So what the faiths do or don't do with their assets and their influence matters a great deal.

The faiths:

- are major land owners – they own 7-8 per cent of the habitable land surface of the planet;
- have vast media networks;
- major providers of health and education – they are involved in more than half of all schools worldwide;
- control more than 7 per cent of international financial investments;
- are often trusted where government and military leaders are not;
- can also be tremendous sources of inspiration and hope at a time when many people can feel despair at the scale of the environmental challenge facing the world.

ARC Secretary General Martin Palmer says: "Religions for centuries have helped energise people and communities for action. They offer stability and resilience in a world where too many initiatives fail through lack of deep roots, and can bring a long-term perspective which will be based more on optimism than fear."

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