

An activities teacher once came to speak at my school, and asked: 'What do the religions all have in common?' 'Belief in a divine being?', we replied. 'Places to pray? A sense of purpose?' 'Yes to almost all,' he said cheerfully. 'But there's something else... what all the faiths have in common is camping.'

It is what Muslim pilgrims have traditionally done on the Haj to Mecca; it is how Christian pilgrims travel to Santiago de Compostela; it is how Hindus sleep on their great pilgrimage trails to the source of the Ganges; it is how Tibetan Buddhist lamas still teach – erecting giant tents in the mountains with prayer flags flying from them, as their followers set up camp around.

It is, of course, a practical way of dealing with pilgrimage accommodation. But it also offers the chance to put the 'normal world' into abeyance and live in nature.

So it is not surprising, as the Scouts celebrate their centenary, that religious leaders are emerging as strong supporters of outdoor activities as a vital part of education, helping young people know themselves, and nature, much better. There are many Scout groups run on a religious basis which help the young learn about the importance of caring for the environment, while earning fire-making and night-away badges.

CLEAN-UPS

Other faith-run groups are also proving that this is one of the best ways of engaging young people, especially as more and more of them are growing up in cities.

In 2006 the Mongolian Buddhist temple of Gesar Sum set up an eco-camp in the countryside outside Ulaanbaatar; dozens of young people and monks from the city camped out in *gers* – traditional Mongolian tents – and organized clean-ups of some of the city's dirtiest sites. 'It is important to realize how beautiful nature is, so that you will look after it,' said Gesar Sum monk, Munkhbataar. 'One way to realize that is to experience it.'

In Birmingham, United Kingdom, the Green Medina group – named after the Arabic word for a traditional Muslim city – is trying something similar, adding rap and movie cameras to keep participants engaged. Young Muslims from all over the city will join working camps to clear up their community

Faith in nature



Gregg Plummer/Flickr

streets and parks 'because a cleaner Medina's a greener Medina'. 'Many of these kids were born in the city, but their parents grew up working in fields,' explains the movement's spokesman, Hajji Ayman Ahwal. 'Islam concentrates on cleanliness – prayer isn't valid without the ablutions – so we want to make them proud of their environment.'

In the United States of America, camping is one of the key strands of several Christian ministries and is particularly strong in Methodism, which a century and a half ago had few buildings in the country. Preachers rode around the countryside speaking from rough board tabernacles and people would come many miles to hear them, staying in cabins or tents. In Arkansas alone there are still four old Methodist campgrounds, still active today.

CEDARS OF LEBANON

Sometimes the effects of activities that link faith with nature only emerge years later. Take a meeting headed by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and the Lebanon's Association for Forest Development and Conservation in 2004: its aim was to create an agreement between the Maronite church, the main Christian sect in Lebanon; the

mayor of Jounieh, just north of Beirut; and two local landowners. At issue was the 400-hectare Harissa forest – of which they were all part-owner – one of the last remaining green areas on the Lebanese coast, and identified as one of the critical areas of biodiversity in the Mediterranean area.

For the Maronites it was sacred land. For the mayor of Jounieh it was a prestigious location for ecotourism. So both groups were keen to protect it. But the agreement of the landowners was critical if the forest was to be saved from the kind of development that has already lined the rest of the coastline with concrete villas. Eventually, one of them – a man in his 40s called Rida El Khazey – said he would sign, and his neighbour agreed to do the same. Later I asked him why he had agreed to forgo so much money to leave his land in its natural state.

'Because when I was a young boy I went camping with the Scouts associated with the Maronite church,' he explained. 'We planted trees there and it was one of my happiest times. That forest is special.'

Victoria Finlay, Alliance of Religions and Conservation (www.arcworld.org).



Sjoerd Mouissie/Flickr

A fatal complacency

‘Our friends in the industrialized world have had the luxury of closing their minds to the real impact of climate change on the fragile, precious atmosphere that surrounds our planet. Where it has occurred in their countries, its effects – with the possible exception of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the European heat wave in 2003 – have been relatively benign. They have felt just a gentle caress from the winds of change.

But how much more anxious might they be if they depended directly on nature’s cycles to feed their families, or if they lived in slums or shelters made of plastic bags? This is the reality of life in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The poor, vulnerable and hungry are daily exposed to the harsh edge of climate change.’

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

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Not just a load of old rubbish

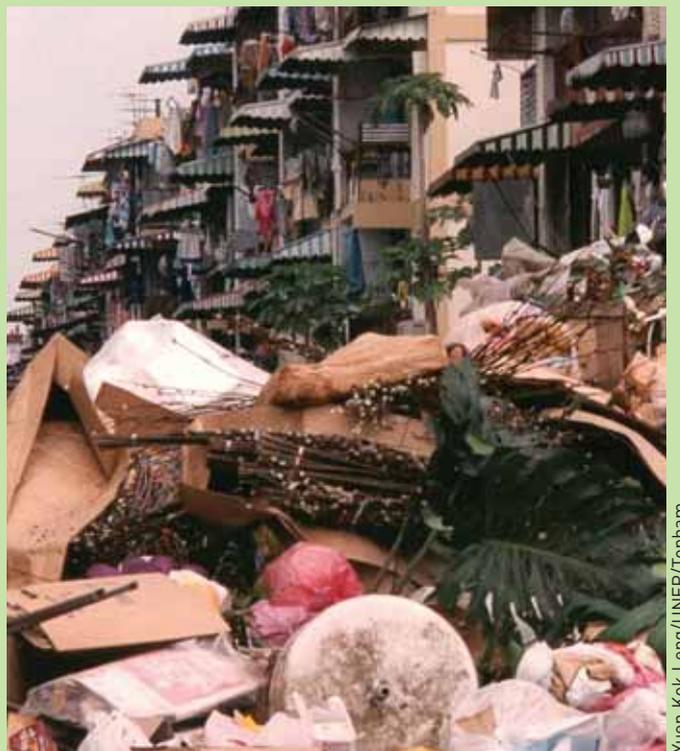
‘When Indonesia was branded the dirtiest nation in the world by the World Health Organization, it was a wake-up call, Vania Santoso and colleague Wening Pranaya told TUNZA at the award ceremony for the Volvo-UNEP

Adventure Award. Their project ‘Useful Waste for a Better Future’ had won the \$10,000 first prize: ‘In our small way, we have tried to change perceptions and improve our local environment.’

Their two-year-old project encourages people to separate their rubbish, turning organic wastes into fertilizer using a ‘magic waste basket’ composter; and being creative with their inorganic waste, crafting some of it into bags, photo frames and souvenirs.

It all started in 2004, when the two 15-year-olds visited their local waste dump in Surabaya. What they saw motivated them to spread the word about the 3Rs – Reduce, Reuse, Recycle – through handing out cassettes and leaflets, and by running workshops, road shows and competitions. Their message: processing waste can provide wonderful fertilizers for gardens, and the things you make can provide much-needed income – and reduce the amount of dumped waste, which can be a health and environmental hazard.

Results are astounding – the amount of waste in the girls’ municipality has dropped by more than a third; people in one neighbourhood are making 2 tonnes of fertilizer and earning almost \$1,000 from the sale of souvenirs each month. In another part of town, there has been an 80 per cent drop in the amount of waste. It’s not surprising that their campaign is being rolled out across the country by the Government, with the girls receiving a commendation from their President, and the Indonesian equivalent of an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*.



Yuen Kok Leng/UNEP/Topham