



## Sacred Land: Green Pilgrimage Network Launch & Celebration Assisi, Italy, October 31 – November 2, 2011

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The first global network aimed at greening pilgrimage – the largest movement of people worldwide – will be launched in the presence of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh KG, KT, at the Sacred Land celebration in Assisi, Italy, from October 31 to November 2, 2011. The event is organised by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) in association with WWF.

The Green Pilgrimage Network will help the faiths make their holy cities and sacred sites as environmentally sustainable as possible according to their own theologies and understanding. Pilgrimage is the world's biggest travel event, with hundreds of millions of people becoming pilgrims every year, whether for a few hours, days or even weeks. The largest human gathering in recorded history was the Maha Kumbh Mela, a festival held every 144 years in Prayag, Allahabad, India, which in 2001 attracted more than 60 million Hindus.

Ten faith traditions have nominated pilgrim cities or sacred sites to become founding members of the Green Pilgrimage Network, ranging as far afield as Louguandai in China for Daoists to St Albans in the UK for Anglicans and Amritsar for the Sikhs<sup>1</sup>. The city authorities of Jerusalem, a major pilgrimage destination for three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – will join the network to green the city for all pilgrims.

Also launched at Sacred Land will be the first Green Hajj Guide aimed at the two million Muslim pilgrims who visit Mecca (Makkah) in Saudi Arabia each year for the Hajj, the biggest annual pilgrimage in the world. Sacred Land will also celebrate 25 years of faith action on the environment since the first Assisi gathering in 1986 when Prince Philip invited faith leaders to consider how their beliefs, practices and teachings could help protect the environment.

That 1986 event, held to celebrate WWF International's 25th anniversary, led to the first statements on the environment by leaders of five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) and launched hundreds of thousands of faith-run environmental projects around the world. So many, in fact, that in 2009 the scale of faith action on the environment was described as "potentially the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history"<sup>2</sup>.

ARC Secretary-General Martin Palmer, who organised the first Assisi event for Prince Philip, said: "Today, thanks to that first Assisi event, every major religion takes ecology seriously and is involved in environmental projects, and the world's religions are increasingly recognised as playing a pivotal role in protecting the natural world."

Martin Palmer added: "The Green Pilgrimage Network will ask the faithful to live, during the most intense of religious experience, in a faith-consistent way. To travel to a holy place in such a way as to treat the whole world as sacred is to be a true pilgrim."

This year, as it celebrates its Golden Jubilee, WWF will also join ARC and the religious leaders at Assisi, along with representatives from major bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and USAID. Also present will be ICLEI, an international association of local governments on sustainable development, which is supporting the Green Pilgrimage Network.

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## Notes for editors

### The Green Pilgrimage Network

<sup>1</sup> Faith cities in the Green Pilgrimage Network will include: Amritsar, India, for Sikhs; Assisi, Italy, for Roman Catholics; Etchmiadzin, Armenia, for Armenian Orthodox; Haifa, Israel, for Baha'is; Kano, Nigeria, for Islam's Qadiriyyah Sufi tradition; Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Muslims; Louguandai, China, for Daoists; St Albans, England, for Anglicans; Trondheim, Norway, for the Lutheran Church of Norway.

Other founder members of The Green Pilgrimage Network include the Church of Scotland whose Pilgrimage Pathway in Luss, Loch Lomond, in the National Trussocks National Park, marks 1,500 years of Christianity; the Coptic Orthodox Church, which will green its St Bishoy Monastery at Wadi El Natroun in Egypt, visited by some 100,000 mainly Coptic Orthodox pilgrims every summer; Jinja Honcho, the Association of Shinto shrines in Japan, responsible for around 80,000 shrines, including many in forests that are the dwelling places of kami deities.

<sup>2</sup> At ARC's Windsor Celebration, in November 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", and: "the biggest mobilisation of people and communities that we have ever seen on this issue". At Windsor, nine of the world's major faiths – Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism and Sikhism – committed to long-term practical action to save the environment, announcing a huge range of practical initiatives, from the planting of 8.5 million trees in Tanzania to the greening of religious buildings throughout the world. The Green Pilgrimage Network is one of the initiatives to come out of Windsor 2009.

### The Assisi Event

The 2011 Assisi event will begin on the evening of Monday October 31 with a dazzling celebration in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Palazzo Monte Frumentario. Held in the presence of HRH The Prince Philip, the ceremony will bring together music, dance, ritual and teaching from many religions and cultures, illustrating their common sacred mission to care for the natural world with examples of projects worldwide.

Following this inspirational opening, some 90 delegates from around the world, representing all the major faiths, will attend a two-day conference. This gathering will launch the Green Pilgrimage Network, a major new initiative addressing the environmental impact of millions of pilgrims annually making their way to sacred sites, as well as review the achievements of the religion and conservation movement over the last 25 years. Finally the delegates will look at the way forward for religion and environmentalism in the light of their long-term plans and the challenges they face.

### About ARC

ARC was founded by Prince Philip in 1995 to help the world's major faiths develop environmental programmes based on their own teachings, beliefs and practices, and has been working with the environmental side of sacred sites and pilgrimage routes for many years. In 2006 WWF-International and ARC published a ground-breaking document titled Beyond Belief which explored the role that faith can play in the protection of sacred forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, seas and deserts. For more information, visit [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)

### WWF

Founded in 1961 as the World Wildlife Fund (now simply called WWF), WWF is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. A global organisation active in over 100 countries, WWF is the world's leading environmental organisation, addressing global threats to people and nature such as climate change, the peril to endangered species and habitats, and the unsustainable consumption of the world's natural resources.

### Assisi

The ancient and beautiful city of Assisi is highly suitable as a venue to launch the Green Pilgrimage Network. It is the birthplace of the Catholic Saint of Ecology, St Francis (1181-1226) and has been a pilgrimage centre for almost 800 years. It will become one of the founding cities of the Green Pilgrimage Network.

### More information

ARC Secretary-General Martin Palmer is available for comment.

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