

Hello from ARC, and here is our Spring Newsletter

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1. A new way of telling stories

One of the great things about this job is that we are always hearing wonderful stories of people and communities doing inspiring and often imaginative things to protect the natural world.

We try and tell some of these stories on our website, but it is beginning to creak at the edges a little, and it is now time for something better. After a trip by the team to visit the UNDP, World Bank, and several US-based faith groups in February, we think we know what we would like this to be.

We envision a new and simple portal, opening up ways of learning about good ecological practice by faiths in a way that is user-friendly, easily manageable, affordable, inspirational, and useful, and we would like to launch this in November (well, one might as well have two crazy goals rather than one).

The NGO Green Faith in the US is looking at creating something similar, and we're working together to collect success stories (and presumably horror stories too) about websites that have worked in this way, as well as seeing what the faiths (and environmental NGOs and intergovernmental agencies want and find useful). And make sure that what we create is compatible with what other people are creating.

At this early stage I'd love to ask you what you need? How might you use such a site? What models of great practice are there out there? Do email me on victoriaf@arcworld.org and if I can, I'll incorporate your feedback into any briefing documents I create, and into how we envision this from the very beginning.

2. A new environmental thangka

Talking of stories, one of our nicest stories recently came from Mongolia, where ARC was helping the World Bank and the Mongolian Government create a handbook about Buddhist caring for the environment – with the idea of finding out what the sangha is doing already, and creating a wish list of projects on which outside agencies might be able to help them. It includes a guide to Mongolian Buddhists about making a long-term plan for the environment, along the lines of the Seven Year Plan, but Eight is a particularly lucky number in Mongolia and China. We asked Gandan Monastery (the centre of Mongolian Buddhism) to help us out in updating the book, and also in creating a cartoon. Originally this was to be along the lines of One Day in Mongolia, a well-known painting, with lots of interesting characters in it, telling different accounts of looking after nature.

However when the commission came back from the artist, Mr Dulguun, it was nothing like what we were expecting. The artist had taken one look at the brief, and with the Gandan monks, had decided that the cartoon idea was hackneyed. What the Buddhists of Mongolia needed, they thought, was a new thangka, or devotional painting which could be used throughout the country to explain the message that true Buddhists should protect nature. So that is what he created:

In the centre is the White Old Man of Mongolian mythology, surrounded by the traditional symbols of longevity: peaches, a conch-shaped rock, cranes, a crystal rosary, a pure stream welling up from a sacred rock, and deer. He is seen as a supreme example of how to live in harmony with nature, but in this new painting there are other figures too. They are monks and laypeople helping create, perpetuate and protect the perfect landscape. Some are making an offering to a stream; others are worshipping a sacred ovoo to protect the mountains; others are going out into the steppes to find sacred sutras; and in the final scene monks are pleading with the spirits of the trees to forgive those who cut them down, with the repentant tree-cutters making apologies. This new thangka has been made into a poster distributed to monasteries all over Mongolia, and we hope it will be copied – as the best thangkas always are copied – and placed in temples throughout the country to pass on the message that if you are a Buddhist, then you must take care of the environment.

For us it's a wonderful example of how faiths can pick up environment programmes and really run with them, creating new ideas and thoughts and ways of doing things, in their own way. And that the worse thing to stick to is your own preconceptions.

The handbook launched to really positive feedback in February (go to <http://tinyurl.com/dn8uqt> where you can link to the handbook in Mongolian and English, and find a poster of the new thangka - and try <http://tinyurl.com/cbskrs> for the “wish list” of projects needing some help.)

3. Buddhists in China – and in India

My colleagues, Martin Palmer and He Xiaoxin have just got home from the massive Chinese-sponsored World Buddhist Forum held in Wuxi, China and Taipei, Taiwan, where hundreds of monks from around the world showed that they were engaged with the idea of protecting nature: more news later.

But meanwhile another, much smaller conference was being held at the same time in India, led by one of the two Karmapas (heads of the Kagyu Buddhist lineage), 23-year-old Ogyen Drodul Trinley Dorje. I saw him in Tibet in 1994 when he was a child, lowering a kind of wooden arm to bestow blessings to pilgrims, and taking some mischievous pleasure in lowering it a little quickly over certain shoulders. Since his teenage years he's become something of a leader in environmental matters in his community, and this is his first major eco-conference, held for followers of his lineage, which represents millions of people living in critical areas throughout the Himalayas. At that meeting they decided to create a list of 108 Things to do to protect the Environment, and some of the Things were directly inspired by the Mongolian Eight Year Plan. 108 is a holy number – there are 108 prayer beads on a mala string, and there are 108 books in the teachings of the Buddha. There are also sometimes said

to be 108 different ways in which we humans relate to the world outside, through our six senses, in the past, future and present, positively and negatively etc. One Buddhist monk, more pragmatically: each time you went through the string of 108 beads it counts as 100 prayers, because even but any devout Buddhist could be expected to lose track of about 8 each time. Either way, I'll post the list of 108 as soon as I get it, and readers can decide which eight, in an ideal world, they'd let slip, and which 100 they'd try to keep. <http://tinyurl.com/ctky5r> "Do what is useful even if painful, and what is both useful and pleasurable," he urges.

4. Two books come along at once

There we were, at ARC head office, thinking that it would be a wonderful idea to compile a book full of stories from some of the faith leaders who have been working with the environment for many years... and now two have come along at once – the Sierra Club's *Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation*, and Interfaith Power and Light's *Love God, Heal Earth: 21 Leading Religious Voices Speak Out on Our Sacred Duty to Protect the Environment*. Perhaps appropriately, one comes from the faith side, and one from the secular side.

One of our favourite quotations about the “religions approach” to the environment is from Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, which is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organisation with around 1.3 million members. “I was part of the generation that made the choice – the horrendous strategic blunder – of situating ourselves outside the institutions of faith,” he told the [Christian Science Monitor](#) in 2007. But how they have been making up for it since. First came the impressive “Faith in Action” last year (which can be downloaded here: <http://tinyurl.com/d3dvdw>) with an example from every US State, including the Community Lutheran Church of Sterling, in Virginia, which operates a community garden and provides organic produce to local low-income families, or the Islamic Environmental Group of Wisconsin, or the Catholic Bishops of the Dioceses of Pueblo and Colorado Springs in Colorado, who spoke out against the heavy pollution of a major creek nearby, when it was inundated by sewage spills. Their participation helped bring in government officials from all levels, to see the creek for themselves. This year they have published *Holy Ground*, edited by Lyndsay Moseley, which includes articles by the Patriarch Bartholomew, the Pope, Wendell Berry, as well as many of the active US-based faith conservationists. Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University writes about how this current crisis can be seen as the outer manifestation of the barrenness in our inner lives. Essayist David James Duncan writes a terrific piece called *Song of Salmon*, about his own journeys to learn and explore how – in very many ways - salmon are holy.

“Salmon are holy,” I replied, “because on the Bible's very first page God says “Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life... And God created great whales and fishes and every living creature that moveth...And blessed them, saying Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas.” Does that sound like a description of an industrial pond full of tilapia or a brown tide of net-penned salmon sewage?

Allan Johnson's account of how Christian groups took action to protect Virginia's landscape from what is technically called “MTR” or mountaintop removal, but which is a deeply devastating surgical activity by mining companies to find coal cheaply,

which involves lopping off mountains, and shoving the debris into valleys. He describes how, through their action, many came to understand the sacred nature of landscape.

Several of the contributors also appear in Sally Bingham's book *Love God, Heal Earth*. She writes personally about her own powerful story, setting up Interfaith Power and Light and the Regeneration Project, understanding how important it is for Christians to see how they need to love God's Creation if they are going to love God. The book also contains voices from Buddhism, Reform Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Unitarian-Universalists, Evangelical Christians and others.

I'd recommend buying both books – and they are so straightforwardly written that they make excellent train reading, which is more than can be said for many publications that cross our paths.

5. Earth Hour

We had a lovely Earth Hour on March 25th: as well as switching off all standby machines for the weekend, many of us had candlelight moments, remembering what a gift electricity is, but also how we don't always need it. Many faith groups joined in, in their own way, and we ran a story about some of the ideas for candlelit services and blessings of candles, and ringing of bells, and meditations. <http://tinyurl.com/cangna> But we also received this Thank You letter for ARC's involvement in a special meditation mass on the Tuesday before Earth Hour. "I wanted to say thank you for your inspiration and encouragement to keep the earth hour on Saturday night. I asked my two boys to take it seriously with me and we had the most wonderful hour: no lights, no screens, no music, just reading by candlelight. The peace was tangible and it was very special. We clocked the electric meter and used 2 units in the earth hour and 28 in the next hour with lights and screens back on. Even the boys were impressed at the difference!"

6. Once in every 28 years

Tomorrow – April 8 2009 - is Birkat Ha'Chamah – the Jewish blessing of the sun. It happens just once every 28 years, and represents the return of the sun to its original place in the heavens. It's an event which has been highlighted by our colleagues in Hazon who have been developing a most exciting Seven Year Plan. Whatever your faith, take a look at the sun tomorrow, and think about how all life depends on it, how it can be our gift, and our fear. Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Centre gives a blessing ceremony: <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1492>. Or read about what Hazon (<http://tinyurl.com/cgotwo>) and the Big Green Jewish website (<http://tinyurl.com/cr5lua>) have to say about it.

7. Join ARC on Twitter

ARC has created a Twitter account: link [here](#) to follow us. Our aim is, in 140 characters, to give a regular, haiku-like glimpse into what it is for faith to be working on conservation and nature issues.

[Posts include:](#)

Why is watching religions working on ecology like watching slime moulds coalesce? And why is this wonderful? <http://tinyurl.com/crsq2v>

Just read SH Nasr's observation that the environmental crisis is an outer manifestation of the barrenness of our inner lives.

Would Christ weep if he saw a spectacled duck shot on her nest? People: "yes" priests "no". The Tablet has story: <http://tinyurl.com/8wn2na>.

Reading Rabbi Israel Salantar: "First, a person should put his house together, then his town, then the world."

Remembering an Orthodox nun in France. When they take on a new job they don't make changes for 3 months: then they KNOW what needs changing.

In the next months we hope to tell you about Plans and ideas coming in from Jewish, Jesuit, Anglican, Sikh and Hindu groups, as well as a Faith in Water workshop, and an update on our retreat centre network.

With all best wishes

ARC

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