

The unusual revolution

Why the faith-based environmental movement has become the largest civil society movement in the conservation world.

In 2009 the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, Olav Kjørven surprised many in the environmental world by saying publically and loudly that the faiths were “now the largest civil society movement on climate change in the world”. And it is true. World wide every major faith now has mainstream programmes on the environment ranging from greening pilgrimage routes such as the Hajj or the pilgrimage to Trondheim in Norway, through greening buildings from gurdwaras to mosques around the world, or creating new centres for environmental action – as the Confucian Tradition of China is now planning to do.

Yet to look at the material coming out of the mainstream environmental groups you would imagine this simply was not happening. And this is because they have largely, I would argue, lost the plot and are quite seriously out of touch. I recently attended an event at St. James’s Palace, London hosted by the Prince of Wales. It was concerned with the dramatic rise in the illegal wildlife trade. The faiths, through the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) www.arcworld.org are heavily committed to working against this illegal trade. ARC’s approach in partnership with WWF has been to work with the Daoists of China to undercut demand. The Daoists have done this by showing that use of animal parts, and especially endangered animals in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is against the actual tradition of TCM. Furthermore that to try and rebalance your yin and yang (the basic purpose of TCM) by putting at risk the balance of Nature means the medicine will not work. You cannot balance yourself at the expense of the planet. In fact the Daoists are now saying it is likely to make you sicker rather than offer any cure. This undermining of demand is then supported by programmes in Indonesia, India and Africa by faith leaders against the trade itself.

What stunned me at the St. James’s Palace meeting was how out of touch and old fashioned the vast majority of the environmental groups responses were to this crisis. We heard lots of stories of building game reserves, hunting down poachers, burning captured loot. The spokespeople were almost without exception white men and a lot of it reminded me of a phrase used back in the 1980’s by the then Head of Development at WWF UK, Ivan Hattings. He described such programmes as “white men shooting rhinos in the bum with a dart!” It took the director of Wild Aid to point out the basic flaw in all this. He claimed that around \$60 million was spent last year on this issue by the environmental groups worldwide. Only 0.5% was spent on trying to curb demand, the rest was on frankly largely pointless prevention programmes. It is the demand that drives this and that alone.

We in the environmental movement are not winning the war because we have often as a movement not looked to see who people really trust; who is present at a local as well as national and international level, nor have we taken culture seriously. In fact we have ignored the values that guide people. Which is why in May this year the Club of Rome and ARC launched a new programme called ValueQuest <http://www.clubofrome.org/?p=5821> in order to bring the environmental and development worlds into touch with the real values that guide peoples lives – and many of these are of course spiritual. The environmental crisis is not a crisis of information. We have that and have had for years. It is a crisis of the stories we live within; a crisis of imagination and of vision. Data is not the answer. It is only a tool. The answer is to understand the values which drive behaviour and then see what stories, what mega narrative drives these stories which create the values which then either offer the solutions or fuel the crisis. This is why Arc and the Club of Rome are working with artists, poets, novelists, playwrights, spiritual leaders, psychologists and psychoanalysts. The data we have is only as much use as the values that use it, the stories that narratively interpret the information.

And yet the environmental movement on the whole has completely ignored these worlds, which actual change the way people think and behave.

Amongst those whom we could be working with but have largely excluded are the world's major faiths. Yet despite the fact that their perspectives, their land ownership and their influence has been ignored or not even seen as valid by the bulk of the conservation/ecology movements, they have quietly been getting on with protecting our living planet. - so much so that they now constitute the largest environmental movement in the world.

The short sightedness that lead to the exclusion of faith has been well expressed by Carl Pope, former Executive Director and then until last year, President of the Sierra Club – one of the largest US conservation organisations. He said: "I was part of the generation that made the choice – the horrendous strategic blunder – of situating ourselves outside the institutions of faith. Now we have a chance to repent of, and reform from, that error."

Back in 1986 HRH Prince Philip, then the International President of WWF, worked out that if the future was about changing hearts and minds then there were only two forces which have ever positively from time to time changed human society. These are the arts and religion – and in many cases the two were synonymous. This is why in 1986 he initiated what the UN now calls “potentially the largest civil society movement in the world” – the involvement of the faiths in environmental action.

When the 1986 meeting took place (in Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of St. Francis) there was only one religious environmental programme in the world – the Buddhist Perception of Nature project working with Tibetan refugees and Thai monks and nuns. Today there are hundreds of thousands of religious environmental

programmes in countries around the world. Very few have ever had any link with the major environmental movements – and perhaps more tellingly – very few have ever felt these movements had anything they needed. Quietly, at every level from small villages in Mexico to mega-cities such as Shanghai, the faiths have developed their own environmental movements, programmes and action.

This has built upon certain key aspects of the faiths.

Firstly, their wisdom and their standing in communities. The faiths are the oldest human institutions and therefore the most 'sustainable'. They know from hundreds or thousands of years of guiding humanity, how to effect change in such a way as to carry people with you. The major faiths have perfected the appearance of being unchanging while subtly changing the whole time. Of course a few versions of every faith shout, threaten, try to scare or intimidate, make people feel guilty in order that they can push them to do what they want. But then so do many of the environmental movements. The vast majority of faiths help people to make sense of their world and help them to be compassionate within that understanding. Forget the nonsense about faith only being interested in the Next Life. Virtually every education system, health system, place of refuge has its roots in the work of the faiths over centuries, caring for, educating and helping the poorest of the poor.

Secondly, the faiths are trusted in ways that no government, international agency such as the UN, nor any NGO is. In most parts of the world, people will listen to their religious leaders first and therefore if you want to reach people it has to be in partnership with those whom they trust. I have seen so many environmental programmes cosy up to governments or even worse, multi-nationals, only to be betrayed by them and the scheme to be discredited in the eyes of the people. Think of the vain hopes placed at huge expense to almost every major environmental organisation in lobbying for and working with the national governments who went to the Copenhagen COP in 2009. Not only were they betrayed but even evicted from the display hall.

Thirdly the faiths are involved in what one can best describe as the business of religion. They own outright about 8% of the habitable surface of the planet and a further 15% or so is considered sacred (mountains, rivers, cities, pilgrimage routes) and therefore better protected than other areas. They run or are involved with around 50% of all schools (in Africa according to UN figures this rises to 64%) and these schools are usually the ones in the slums and in the rural areas. They have huge media networks from newspapers, through TV and radio to websites. They constitute 14% of the total capital market. They feed millions of people every day – for example the Sikhs in India feed 30 million people everyday. They are significant producers of goods from their farms and forests and they are significant purchasers. Which is why around the world they are now concentrating on the ecological management of these assets – from working with FSC on their forest holdings, to developing environmental management for sacred sites. For example, through the Green Pilgrimage Network which is greening the Hajj and has helped create China's

first green pilgrimage city at the Daoist sacred site of Louguan. In Africa, recent commitments by the leading Christian, Muslim and Hindu traditions means a commitment to raise, plant and nurture over 70 million trees. From developing faith consistent food purchasing programmes – for example the Quakers in the UK – to faith consistent investment programmes such as Islamic banking in Indonesia.

But perhaps the most important thing that the conventional environmental movements can learn from this unusual revolution is the importance of celebration. So much of the standard way environmental issues are raised is about denial, giving up, stopping doing and about guilt if you don't. Don't fly, don't drive, don't do this, don't do that. Of course that has to be a part of the message but the faiths have known for a very long time that fasting is important but you cannot ask people to fast all the time. This is why we have our Lent, or Ramadam or Pansa. But then we party – Easter, Eid Ul Fitr and Wesak for example.

In a recent meeting about an Environmental education toolkit for East Africa faith-based schools, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) team leader pointed out the difference between the standard environmental education toolkit and this new faith-based one. "The usual one starts with telling the children how dreadful everything is and what has gone wrong. Our one – for Muslim and Christian schools – starts by saying thank you to God for creating such a fabulous, beautiful, complex and exciting world. Only then do we turn to our responsibilities and the problems that have come to trouble this wonderful world, knowing we are not alone."

Ironically, I think there is more realism in the faiths about how and why people's behaviour changes than in any of or all of the environmental movements. Alone, the faiths will continue to be the most successful quiet revolutionaries changing the way we treat nature. Together with the wider environmental world, we could all do so much more. Come and join us!

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