



## Green Pilgrimage Network newsletter No. 5 January 2013

You can read this newsletter and previous newsletters [here](#)

Hello!

Right now, in Allahabad, in northern India, millions of people have gathered, or are gathering or preparing to gather, by foot, plane, train, bus, car, boat or bicycle, for the biggest arrival of people in one place that the world has ever seen. It is the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, held every 12 years in turn in four different cities around India – the four places where, it is said, the sacred jug (or Kumbh) in Hindu tradition spilled its drops of immortality, many aeons ago. At the Kumbh, people go to the sacred river (in Allahabad's case, the two rivers of the Ganga and Yamuna, which run together at this place) and bathe, meditate and pray.



Kumbh authorities were, apparently, expecting 80 to 100 million people to be there at some time during the festival, to bathe in the holy rivers. Where there are millions of people there are also (particularly today in the age of plastics) millions of tons of trash and sewage. Twelve years ago there were 20,000 temporary toilets at the Kumbh and it was not enough; this year there are 35,000 and

apparently it is still not enough. The camps are built on a flood plain, so the sacred river takes away the detritus during the monsoon season every year, but it is hoped that there will be enough human energy in the future for another way to be found, both by the holy city administrations and by the Hindu leadership. And we're delighted to say that the process has already begun.



Two weeks ago the Wall Street Journal published [a large article](#) about Green Pilgrimage at the Kumbh, including news of a green camp being operated by our Green Pilgrimage Network partner, the Parnarth Niketan ashram (do read our news from Rishikesh below). Last weekend our colleagues at ARC and the Bhumi Project (our Hindu sister organization) worked with Parnarth

Niketan's swami, Pujya Swamiji, to arrange a meeting of mayors and state officials from around Northern India, committing to making their holy cities greener. The photo shows saplings given as prasad, or sacred offerings, to the State. And here's a link to the [press release](#).

### News from Rishikesh



The Kumbh Mela meeting came out of the work in India by the Bhumi Project as well as a workshop we helped the Bhumi Project and Parnarth Niketan organise in November (which in turn came out of the ICLEI pilgrim cities meeting in Hyderabad in October, the way these things happen.) It brought together representatives from

Kolkata, Mayapur, Rishikesh, Sri Sailam, Varanasi, Vishakapatnam and Vrindavan. It also included key conservationists, including the head of Rajaji National Park and representatives of some of India's most important tiger and wildlife reserves. You can read more of what the team came up with [on our website](#) and if you are attending Trondheim in July, then you will hear much more than. Ideas included:

- An annual Hindu Environment Day (or Week) -- Developing a Green School Curriculum in every pilgrim city
- Developing action-based environmental standards for temples in pilgrim cities, and routes as well as for the towns and cities themselves,
- Pilgrimage shrines based near national wildlife parks to liaise with park authorities to cut down noise and light pollution and urgently find solutions for toilets/waste disposal.
- Finding realistic, affordable solutions for solid waste management – i.e. cleaning up the many tonnes of trash that amass in India's sacred places, particularly at key festivals,

It revealed some really shocking things as well as exciting initiatives: the Durga Puja in Kolkata involves submerging deity statues into the river. But they are painted with lead-filled paint, which could well be responsible for killing wildlife. In Varanasi the new mayor has arranged for litter bins in the old streets around the key temples. And he has taken to phoning the garbage disposal managers at 6am to make sure that all is on target.

And while we thought at first that the link between pilgrimage and tiger

conservation might be rather tenuous, we discovered that there are millions of pilgrims travelling each year through national parks, with a truly serious impact on tigers and wildlife.

I also had a wonderful chance at the end to discuss with Parnarth Niketan what could make a green camp at the Kumbh, and as we all talked in that little office, drinking tea, after witnessing an extraordinary environmental aarti (evening prayer) it really felt as if we were creating something.

As I left Rishikesh to catch a train back to Delhi I saw the waiter from a little restaurant coming onto the street and leaving a bag of rubbish. Before we could move, a calf had strolled over and had picked up a blue plastic bag in its mouth. It had gone before I could grab it. That calf could die from that bag; and the image of the young animal and the blue plastic will stay with me. Something has to be done to get rubbish collection and recycling on the streets of every city; and let us start, with helping the holiest cities set themselves up.

<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=583>

### **A Catholic Green Pilgrimage Network brochure for Rio**



Around three million people are expected to arrive in Brazil from July 23-28, 2013. They will be Catholic pilgrims attending this year's World Youth Day celebrations in Rio de Janeiro where they will experience a week of meetings, worship, music and reconciliation opportunities and will be addressed by Pope Benedict XVI. In preparation for this enormous gathering we have prepared a special 12 page handbook. Find more details and the brochure [here](#) – where you can also download it in Portuguese.

### **And finally, some social media invitations.**

Do follow our twitter account [@arcworld](#) as well as our GPN partners [@ecosikh](#) and [@bhumiproject](#) – and if you would like your own green pilgrimage place/environmental twitter account to be advertised on this newsletter next time, just let us know. Our Facebook is <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Alliance-of-Religions-and-Conservation/191430221625> and if you like us, then please LIKE us.

We were thinking of setting up a Green Pilgrimage Network Facebook account. What do you think?

**Next time**

- *More news about Trondheim in July***
- *A wonderful inspiring sermon about Green Pilgrimage from Scotland***
- *And any other news you would like to tell us***

All best wishes

Victoria Finlay, (written in collaboration with Alison Hilliard [alisonh@arcworld.org](mailto:alisonh@arcworld.org) who is right now in Nairobi, having meetings with UNEP and others.)