



Believing in Our Environment

Faiths and the Environment
in the East of England





Introduction

It could well be argued that the world's first environmental campaigners were its great religions, through whose sacred texts and practices runs a strong theme of care and compassion for the natural world.

But this is no cause for complacency – rather, it should be a call to action for all people of faith to lead by example. We have the power and structures both to spread the word about environmental responsibility and ourselves to live in responsible and sustainable ways; and there is a moral imperative for us to do so.

Just considering the short statements of belief made here, it is clear that all the faiths are united in the recognition that we have a duty to God and one another to respect and protect the earth we have been given.

The East of England Faiths Council and the other partners who have produced this leaflet hope that it will be a useful resource for the faith communities of our region in their day-to-day contact with the many millions of people whom they reach. We know that many within those communities are already actively engaging with these issues – we want to affirm what they are doing and see others joining them.

James Langstaff
Bishop of Lynn
East of England Faiths Council
representative on the Regional Assembly

Acknowledgements

With special thanks to:

Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay (2003) Faith in Conservation:
New Approaches to Religions and the Environment
Alliance of Religions and Conservation: www.arcworld.org
Members of the East of England Faiths Council

The role of faiths in protecting the environment

For over twenty years now, the world's major faiths have been working side by side, not just with each other, but perhaps as importantly, with the major environmental organisations. Their goal is a common one: to help save the planet, to ensure the survival of life on earth and to help humanity find a balance between its needs and those of the rest of creation.



The faiths care for a variety of reasons: for some, because they see all life as the outpouring of the love of the Creator; for others because they see all life as karmically linked through rebirth; for yet others because of their commitment to compassion. The reasons are diverse but the end result is the same. A struggle to help all life on earth flourish.

And in recent years, this partnership between faiths and the environmental movement has grown to become one of the most important areas of collaboration, for the faiths are not just sources of moral and spiritual teaching. They also own quite a large section of the land surface of the planet; run or contribute to over half the world's schools and have a media network larger than any secular organisation. They are key players as well as spiritual guides.

'So go and celebrate nature and through celebration see that so much of what we are doing is dimming the light of creation in so many ways.'

But perhaps the most important contribution is the least expected one. The environmental movement is not good at human psychology. It tells us how bad we are but it never invites us to party! The great skill of the faiths is they give us times of penitence - Lent or Ramadan for example, but they also give us times of celebration - Easter and Eid Ul Fitr. So the

faiths have brought a sense of celebrating the wonders and beauties of nature to the environmental movement. For unless we think all this creation is worth celebrating, why

bother to save it? So go and celebrate nature and through celebration see that so much of what we are doing is dimming the light of creation in so many ways. Then see what differences you can make, guided by the ancient wisdom of faith.

Martin Palmer
Secretary General of ARC

Key environmental issues in our region

We are an environmental regulator. We work with agriculture, business and industry to prevent pollution, minimise waste and harmful emissions to air. We monitor river and water quality to ensure it meets the needs of people and wildlife. We are also responsible for managing flood risk, navigation, fisheries and recreational opportunities.

We are a major employer with 1400 employees across this Region. We are committed to making our workforce as diverse as the environment in which we work. We want to be an employer of choice. We seek to lead by example when it comes to our employment practices and environmental management.

We cannot deliver our work in isolation nor achieve our priorities without you. We need to work in partnership to tackle the challenges ahead. We have identified five top priorities for us to tackle in the next few years. These are climate change, the impacts of agriculture, creating sustainable communities, developing our waterways and dealing with coastal issues.

Of these, climate change is the single biggest issue we are facing and its affects are going to be felt strongly in the East of England. We look forward to working with you to tackle this issue and to 'create a better place' for everyone.

Common themes and values: faith traditions and the environment

Baha'i

Baha'i scriptures teach that, as trustees of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity, humanity must seek to protect the "heritage [of] future generations"; see in nature a reflection of the divine; approach the earth, the source of material bounties, with humility; temper its actions with moderation; and be guided by the fundamental spiritual truth of our age, the oneness of humanity. The speed and facility with which we establish a sustainable pattern of life will depend, in the final analysis, on the extent to which we are willing to be transformed, through the love of God and obedience to His Laws, into constructive forces in the process of creating an ever-advancing civilization.

Summary of statement by the Baha'i Office of the Environment

Buddhism

The Buddha's insight that all things and all beings are interconnected is fundamental to any statement on Buddhism and ecology. The issue of the environment is a global one, where we see most clearly that our actions have consequences on ourselves and others, now and in the future. By trying to lead our lives in line with this insight we ensure that our actions are to the benefit of ourselves and others and not to their detriment.

Behind all our actions are our views and beliefs and so it is not enough just to behave differently: it is a more fundamental change of mind that is required, so that we move from a more self-centred and uninformed view to a broader and wiser view that aims to resonate with the needs of all beings.

We need to live as the Buddha taught us to live, in peace and harmony with nature, but this must start with ourselves.

With thanks to the Cambridge Buddhist Centre and to a summary statement prepared by Kevin Fossey, Buddhist educator.



Al Amin Food Store

Al Amin, a popular food store run by a Muslim family in Cambridge has been the focal point of a drive to raise awareness about climate change. In conjunction with the Akashi project, staff at the store have been involved in engaging their customers in thinking about how to challenge climate change. The staff had their own carbon footprints measured and pictures of them with signs showing pledges they have made to help reduce their personal impact on climate change are displayed around the shop. This picture shows Rahima with a pledge to eat more locally grown fruit and vegetables, as they use less energy to transport than ones flown in from abroad. Shop owner

Abdul Arain states that trying to show leadership in challenging environmental problems is important for him as a Muslim. Islam teaches the importance of 'Khalifa', or the role of humans as trustees or 'vice-roys' for the planet. Responsibility for our surroundings and accountability in front of Allah are strong motivations, which have been the foundation of Al Amin's efforts on climate change.

Christianity

God showed his love by sending his son to save not just humanity, but the entire world. The Christian Response to this sacrifice should be nothing less than a global theology that recognises how individuals are bound to God, each other and their environment.

We are more than stewards of creation, put on the earth to look after it on God's behalf (Genesis 2:15). We are also part of that creation ourselves, waiting for and expecting the redemption of all things (Romans 8:22 – 23).

The interconnectedness between God, creation and humankind, also includes our relationship with one another and our shared responsibilities to each other and to the world around us.

While we are all deeply affected by climate change, it is the world's poorest people who are already suffering intensely from its effects. Our belief in a God of justice compels us to take care of them and to try to repair our damaged world. Both are a matter of extreme urgency.

With grateful acknowledgement to Christian Aid.

Consulting and agreeing

Hindu groups across the Eastern region have been working with the Akashi project to explore the question 'what does climate change mean to me?'. The media coverage on climate change over the years has focussed mainly on melting ice caps. But for the Hindu community here, the observed and predicted effects of climate change in the UK and also in other parts of the world where family members may live, such as India and Eastern Africa were identified to be key matters for concern. Changing monsoon patterns and increased occurrences of flooding, drought and heatwaves are affecting thousands of people already.

Hindu

Sustaining the balance

Hinduism sees God's creation as sacred and God in every object in the Universe. We do not have the right to destroy what we cannot create or to use nature's gifts, such as oil or forests, at a greater rate than we can replenish them. Hindu religion favours a simple life that does not increase material wants. Humanity should not disturb the balance of life, but should help to sustain that balance.

Earth as mother

Hindus revere Earth as mother and all creatures as her children. Earth feeds, shelters and clothes us. If we do not care for her we act like the wood-cutter who cuts the branch on which he sits.

Nonviolence

Hindus believe there is a soul in all plants and animals. No life is inferior and all play their roles. Our belief in reincarnation warns us against harming all forms of life.

Breaking the family

Nature and all her creatures are our family. Through ignorance we destroy our family and that ignorance becomes the root of our suffering. We must learn the inter-connectedness of all beings and understand our moral responsibility to ourselves and the world.

Summary based on the Hindu Statement on Ecology, available in full from ARC at www.arcworld.org.

The Navratri festival is an annual nine night festival of dancing celebrating the female goddesses within Hinduism. It is an ideal time to consider what Hinduism teaches about the protection of our world, which is often referred to as 'Mother Earth' in Hindu teachings. Many of the songs sung during the evenings of the festival celebrate the beauty of nature and the 'shakti' (strength) of Mother Earth, which must be revered.

Hindu teachings stress that everything in the universe is connected; we are part of nature and must take responsibility for the well-being of our environment.

Islam

Allah, the One True God, in His Wisdom, appointed humans, the creatures that He has conferred with the faculty of reason and with free will, to be His vice regents on earth. And while Allah has invited people to partake of the fruits of the earth for their rightful nourishment and enjoyment, He has also directed them not to waste that which Allah has provided for him—for He loveth not wasters.

Furthermore, Allah has ordered humans to administer his responsibilities with Justice. Above all, by virtue of their intelligence, humanity is the only creation of Allah to be entrusted with the ultimate responsibility of maintaining planet Earth in the overall balanced ecology that man found.

Summary of statement prepared by Muhammad Hyder Ihsan Mahasneh for the Muslim World League.

Jainism

Jainism is one of the oldest living religions and fundamental to its belief and practice are vows concerned with reverence for all life forms, and the avoidance of greed and exploitation. Every human being has a duty to promote universal well being. Jainism is therefore fundamentally a religion of ecology that has enabled Jains to create an environment friendly system and code of conduct. They are in the forefront of bringing greater awareness and putting into practice their cardinal principle on ecology.

Summary of statement prepared on behalf of the Institute of Jainology by its president Dr LM Singhvi.



Taking a break from dancing to fill in a questionnaire measuring personal 'carbon footprints' was the ideal way to think about the impact our individual lifestyles have on Mother Earth. The greenhouse gas emissions caused by flying (especially to India), a reliance on cars and eating food imported from 'home' countries were issues that were issues that sparked long, interesting discussions!

Henna painting is a much loved tradition amongst South Asian communities, associated with celebrating. Climate change henna parties

have been a fun, positively charged way to bring younger people together to explore what climate change is and what we can do about it, translating the issues into simple symbols which can then be incorporated into intricate henna designs. Here is an example of a lovely design featuring light-bulbs (which should be low energy ones, preferably turned off when no-one is in the room!) and showers (as a quick shower uses less energy than a bath!).

Judaism

“See to it that you do not destroy my world, for there is no one to repair it after you.”

Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

Together, humankind has a solemn obligation to do whatever we can both to prevent future harm and to preserve the integrity of the creation with which we have been entrusted. Not to do so when we have the technological capacity would be an unforgivable abdication of our responsibility. We must use our God-given gifts to meet the need of all who currently dwell on this planet without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The following principles should serve as the foundation for the development of agreements and policies to address climate change:

- Responsibilities to Future Generations
- Integrity of Creation
- Equitable Distribution of Responsibility
- Protection of the Vulnerable
- Energy Independence

Summary of ‘Global Warming: A Jewish Response’ prepared by The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life

Sikhism

For Sikhism a truly religious society is a cooperative one, because all life is interconnected. A human body consists of many parts and all of them are dependent upon each other. In the same way, all the constituents of this universe and this earth are dependent upon each other. Choices in one place have measurable consequences for the rest of the world. It is part of the same system.

Life, depends upon a bounteous nature. A human being needs to derive sustenance from the earth and not deplete, pollute, burn, or destroy it. Sikhs believe that an awareness of the sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for our survival. A new “environmental ethic” can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage.

Summary of statement compiled by Sri Akhal Takhat Sahib under the guidance of Sri Singh Sahib Manjit Singh, the Jathedar of Anandapur, at the request of the World Sikh Council.



The Lighthouse Furniture project

The Lighthouse Furniture project is a ‘Not for Profit’ organisation in Brentwood, Essex, which aims to provide good quality furniture and household items to all those who wish to use the scheme. They operate a referral scheme which provides up to a 50% discount. The scheme is managed by a small team of staff and relies on the support of volunteers from the community

Their objectives is to offer good quality, essential items of furniture to the people of Brentwood and surrounding areas who are on low incomes or who are marginalized as a result of hardship, poverty,

social exclusion, disability or mental distress, and to make a positive contribution to the reduction in environmental damage.

As a Church they are a member of Faithworks, a national organisation encouraging best practise across faith based organisations engaged in social action. Consequently we are whole heartedly committed to the Faithworks Charter. We also work very closely with the Inter Church Action Group for the Homeless (ICAGH), a local Brentwood charity (Reg No. 1008990) that represents all churches in Brentwood.

Zoroastrianism

The role of humanity in the world is to serve and honour not just the Wise Lord but the Seven Bounteous Creations – sky, water, earth, plants, animals, man and fire – gifts of God to Humanity. Human beings are the overseers of these creations, with the ultimate task of caring for the universe.

The most frequently performed Zoroastrian ritual is the jashan ceremony, which is a thanksgiving ceremony re-enacting the perfect moment of creation, when all was harmony. As God’s finest creation, we must strive towards a perfect world, by combating the forces of Evil through a process of restoration and renovation.

Summary of statement prepared by the Athravan Education Trust and Zoroastrian Studies.



Noah Enterprise

NOAH Enterprise is a charity which seeks, out of Christian conviction, to help the most disadvantaged in the local community. NOAH Enterprise’s Furniture Link is a social enterprise that supplies quality new and used furniture, white goods and electrical appliances. An extensive range of new and second-hand furniture, white goods and reconditioned electrical appliances, in a variety of styles and at a range of prices, are all available at Furniture Link’s spacious 20,000sq.ft. premises in Church Street, Luton. Every item is checked for repairs, then cleaned, restored and tested in the workshops before being offered for sale.

The project has two aims:

- To generate earned income that will help NOAH’s charitable services for homeless and vulnerable people.
- To support the rehabilitation of NOAH’s service users and other disadvantaged and socially excluded people by offering learning and social opportunities within the business activities.

What can we do in our region?

Every major faith has the protection of our natural environment and love for fellow humans at the core of its teachings. So acting on climate change is crucial not only in order to protect God's creation for future generations, but also for today. People's lives and livelihoods are already being lost due to erratic weather conditions. Climate change is already happening.

The average person in the UK emits 11 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year through the energy used in our homes, transport and through what we buy. In comparison, the average person in Bangladesh emits just 0.1 tonnes. The actions of people in our towns and countryside affect our region directly, but also the rest of the world.

People of faith are really motivated to act on climate change. They realize that, while we need governments and the private sector to implement policies that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions on a wider scale, we can all do our bit on an individual, family and community level – leading by example, and spreading the word.

Further information and reading

Cooper, DEP and A. Joy. 1992 The Environment in Question: Ethics and Global Issues. London. Routledge

Palmer, M, S. Nash, and I Hattingh, eds 1987 Faith and Nature. London: Pilkington Press

Tucker, ME, ed. 1998-2003 Religions of the World and Ecology. 6 VOLS. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hickman, L 2005 A Good Life Eden Books Ltd

I Count www.icount.org.uk

Stop Climate Chaos www.stopclimatechaos.org

National Religious Partnership for the Environment www.nrpe.org

Friends of the Earth www.foe.co.uk

So what can you do?

You could estimate you group's and individual carbon footprints (a measure of your personal impact on climate change) then share ideas about how you can work together to make simple changes of lifestyle. These range from trying the energy-saving tips you can find in books and web sites (see information page) to innovative and fun ideas like devising recipes for locally produced foods and hosting clothes swapping parties. Discussing practical ideas can be underpinned by an exploration of what your faith and faith leaders may teach about the importance of all beings and our responsibility to live in a harmonious way with them.

We only really start to take action when we see climate change as real, relevant to ourselves and the way we live in our region, and already affecting the lives of our fellow human beings throughout the world.

With thanks to Akashi, on whose experience of leading faith group discussions this is based.

Reduce. Reuse. Recycle. Campaign. Change.



The partners involved in the production of this booklet are:

Akashi

A DEFRA-funded project created by environmental organisation Cambridge Carbon Footprint in partnership with sustainability consultancy Cambridge Architectural Research and Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum. It aims to engage people from different cultural and faith groups in exploring what climate change means to them and what they can do about it. See www.akashi.org.uk for more information.

Eastern Region Community Waste Network

Is part of The Community Recycling Network UK - a membership organisation promoting community based sustainable waste management as a practical and effective way of tackling the UK's growing waste problem

<http://www.crn.org.uk/networks/regional/eastern>

The Environment Agency: Creating a better place

We have a vision for the environment: a better place for people and wildlife for present and future generations. That means protecting and improving the air that you breathe, the water that you use and the land that you walk on. www.environment-agency.gov.uk

The East of England Faiths Council

EEFC brings together people from the major faith communities in the East of England, providing a way for them to interact with regional governance and the public, private and voluntary sectors. It ensures that faith communities are an effective stakeholder within the community and is the nominating body for the faith seat on the Regional Assembly.

www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk

