

ABCG MEETING Summary

Faith and Conservation in Africa

Faith-based communities comprise the largest social organizations in Africa, representing a repository of opportunities to spread the cause for sustainability in the continent. Conservation leaders should reach out to religious communities to collaborate in implementing these recommendations, with a view to enhancing the capacity for value-based sustainability decisions that link nature and human well-being.

- *Dar Vision on the Future of Biodiversity in Africa*

Meeting Objectives:

- To explore the opportunities available for collaboration between faith communities and conservation groups
- To understand the funding mechanisms that can support such collaboration
- To learn about how conservation groups have developed relationships with faith communities and how they have implemented projects together

Background

Religious faith plays an enormous role in the lives of people around the world, helping to provide an understanding of the world around us and lighting a moral path to follow in times of uncertainty, need or joy. The intersections of faith and conservation are an important element of the *Dar Vision on the Future of Biodiversity in Africa*, in which experts from throughout Africa came together to articulate multidimensional approaches to biodiversity conservation in Africa. Recently, the Biodiversity Analysis and Technical Support program of USAID's Africa Bureau commissioned a report on religion and conservation in Africa. This work, *From Practice to Policy to Practice: Connecting Faith and Conservation in Africa*, was written by Amy Gambrell of IRG, which explores some of the current practices of connecting faith and conservation, provides information on some of the faith groups doing conservation work, and presents several case studies on faith-based conservation.

Tom Dillon, Senior Vice President, Field Programs, World Wildlife Fund, US – Meeting Chair

Tom Dillon noted that faith groups are a major source of conservation inspiration and commitment. However, major conservation groups too seldom partner with the major faiths. There is great potential for more collaboration between conservation and faith that has not been fully developed. What is happening now in Africa and other regions and how can we learn from it? Conservation started with people that had a strong religious background – John Muir more steeped in Christianity than most conservationists are today. So were Thoreau and Emerson – transcendentalists that started conservation movement. Separation between official conservation and religions for a long time. All major faiths have quite a lot of wording in their sacred texts about humans living in harmony in nature, or as a part of nature rather than separated from it. Many conservationists see humans as separate from nature.

Major conservation efforts rely on strong science but undervalue social vehicles for delivering their messages. According to Mr. Dillon, "Humans are transforming the world, so we should better understand how beliefs influence people and how to work in collaboration, while not using faiths for our own purpose." Also, as conservation practitioners, we should pay more attention to our own cultures and beliefs.

From Practice to Policy to Practice

Amy Gambrill, Conservation Specialist, International Resources Group

Amy Gambrill presented a white paper that was commissioned by BATS based on interviews and research from fall 2010. ABCG's Dar Vision process recommended reaching out to faith communities as one way to reach biodiversity goals. She noted that, "Understanding religious background is key to understanding communities' world view." However, one key question is whether we are allowed to work with faith groups. The answer is yes, for secular purposes. Thirteen Federal Agencies and the White House currently have faith-based offices.

Ninety percent of the population in Africa identifies itself as Christian or Muslim and nearly all hold traditional indigenous beliefs. Working with faith groups requires care and a lot of trust. Conservation projects cannot make faiths be carriers of conservation messages. Many conservation programs are using faith messages, including Fauna and Flora International, RARE, and Jane Goodall Institute. There are many faith programs leading conservation programs, including Interfaith Power and Light, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and Baltimore's New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore.

Amy requested that programs share any success stories and lessons learned about working with faith communities.

Working with African Faith Leaders to Develop Eco-Action Plans

Martin Palmer, Executive Director, Alliance of Religions and Conservation

Martin's work stems back from a 1986 meeting at Assisi in which five faith groups created core statements on why they care for nature. According to Martin, "WWF wanted to combine all five statements and remove references to God." However, there is a strong sense of identity in each faith, and we must work specifically with each faith rather than diluting their importance and identity.

"Religions are oldest organizations in the world, the most sustainable, and they have lots of wisdom. They carry authority that no other structure does. More people trust for faith leaders than other leaders," Martin said. Religions own eight percent of habitable land in the world. ARC is currently mapping religious landholdings of forests. Further, 15 percent of forests in the world are sacred, but not necessarily owned by faiths. Faiths run 50 percent of schools around the world, and they are the third largest investing group in the world.

Faiths think in generations. "Faiths sustain, not campaign." There are currently 23 long-term environmental plans being developed in Africa. Faith leaders in Nigeria are doing tree planting, sustainable agriculture, and water conservation on an enormous scale: so far they have committed to planting 50 million trees. Faiths cannot do this alone. Have resources, interest, etc, but don't have info on what to plant, where to plant, how to plant.

USAID's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: Facilitating Partnerships

Zeenat Rahman, Deputy Director, USAID Center for Faith Based and Community Initiatives

Faith-based offices of the US Government were founded under the Clinton Administration and expanded their agenda under the Bush Administration. Religious organizations must identify development objective to work with the US Government. The Establishment Clause: prohibits the US government from creating religion, and it cannot become entangled in religion.

- Only finance activities that have secular purpose; don't have primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion
- Cannot indoctrinate in any faith

Projects cannot require people to participate in prayer service; religious activities must be separate in time and place. The objective cannot advance a faith, but projects can connect development objective with faith teachings.

“Religious actors play the role of leader, gatekeeper, activist, advisor, interlocutor, oppressor, provider, politician, follower, advocate, and agitator.”

Conservation, Education and the Koran

Alice Macharia, Director for East Africa Programs, Jane Goodall Institute

A Roots and Shoots team launched an environmental education program in Madrasahs in 2006 in 22 districts in Coastal Tanzania, where the majority of the coastal population is Muslim. Government, faith leaders, and JGI began working together with communities. They worked with the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training on the mainland and Zanzibar. They worked with the Vice President of the Environmental office, the Muslim Council of Tanzania (BAKWATA), and the Office of Mufti in Zanzibar. They linked environmental stewardships with teachings from the Holy Quran. “Local religious leaders and institutions have significant influence on people’s attitudes and opinions,” Alice said.

They built relationships. They began with Ministry of Education and the Mufti, the Muslim Council. All Seikhs were instructed to work closely with program and support the development of materials linked to Holy Quran. Management committees were established in Zanzibar to oversee project implementation. They held a meeting government and religious stakeholders to discuss their roles and support. They trained 1539 teachers in environmental education, reached 217,537 students – 67,518 from madrasahs, and supported implementation of Tanzania’s education policy. Keys to the program’s success include initial engagement between the Islamic community and the Tanzanian government, openness to incorporate key Islamic stakeholders led to success, and bi-annual stakeholder meetings to build trust and real partnership.

Discussants

Tony Mokombo, Pastor, International Mission for the Great Harvest, Washington DC

There is a saying in his mother tongue, “one finger can find the lice in your hair, but you need the 3 fingers to pick it up.” So, if you want to work with religious people, you must have a long-term goal. The short-term will never work. With the 3-5 year project cycle, little happens once the funding is gone. Religion has been a key into education and health sector, but conservation is behind. “You must go beyond treatment to knowledge of issues and prevention.”

Get stakeholders involved, especially what Tony calls the “*chefs d’opinion*” in the villages, cities, and neighborhoods. “They are not elected or appointed, but when they speak, people listen to them. Work with them and people listen.”

Heather E. Eves, Virginia Tech, JHU/SAIS and Mt. Olivet United Methodist Church

Working with faith groups on conservation issues has been an important theme for Heather throughout her career. As former Director of the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force, there were recommendations from numerous colleagues on the group on working with faith-based groups. Mt. Olivet United Methodist

Church in Arlington, Virginia has been working to bring environmental awareness to its 1400-member congregation. Now it is an official committee at church, and they taught the “Blessed Earth” series on Hope for Humanity, Hope for Creation based on Serve God, Save the Planet.

Lisa Gaylord, Wildlife Conservation Society

Passion is a commonality between conservation and faith; there is common ground of ethical and moral values. But they need new ways of talking to each other.

Catholic Relief Services was the only international NGO in 1986 in Madagascar, a failed state at that time. The Catholic Church was a long-standing institution. An attempted relationship between a conservation group and CRS didn't work out; was there a divorce between conservation and development? The two groups didn't really sit down to understand commonality upon which to build partnership; their values were the same, but they were speaking different languages. Religions and conservation have missed opportunities to work together. They need to define the commonality, share knowledge, and understand what each brings to the table. We need to understand the importance of faith in African countries: their trust, longevity, and presence.

Discussion

Below are several highlights from the discussion that followed the formal presentations.

Policy and Roles: There is tension created in US development efforts about separation of church and state. It's good to talk about faith and religion, instead of only culture and religion. Some felt that there is an extreme division between science and faith that is greater in the U.S. than elsewhere in the world. We can increase the odds that we don't fail in the future by acknowledging that religious literacy can be essential for a turning point. Cross-cultural partnerships take time and great effort to achieve meaningful conversation and understanding. We can highlight similarities, but also must recognize and respect differences.

Risk, Faith and Conservation: One cross-cultural challenge is maintaining your own center and faith and listening to where others are coming from. One needs to understand one's own belief system while working with others without trying to change others. Many faiths see themselves as having sacramental relationship with nature rather than managing nature: the difference between humans protecting the forest, and the forests protecting us.

In conservation planning, we work to minimize risks, while many faith traditions urge their adherents to risk greatly for great reward. Religion challenges people to identify themselves proudly as members of that religion and challenges them to live accordingly to beliefs. Faith groups take the risk that this is a purposeful, meaningful, and beautiful world that we are a part of and have responsibility for. Some feel that the “environmental movement” has an over emphasis on apocalypse, fear and pain, and one joked that conservation groups should “leave the apocalypse to the faith groups.”

Modern conservation is a child of Abrahamic monotheistic religious tradition, and has the best and worst of a missionary movement. There is a fascinating debate with geologists about renaming the current era as the “Anthropocentric Era.”

Conservation and Faith in Practice: In many cases, there are indigenous practices that support conservation that have not yet been validated by conservation organizations. How can we identify and validate appropriate African ideas for African conservation (examples included rotating forest plots).

Working with indigenous practices and groups is a very local issue. There is no way to say how to work with any one faith, because it is local. Find a friend of the project to lead you and speak plainly to directors/funders of the project – use a local guide.

In all of the presentations there has been an underlying assumption that the fundamental beliefs of faiths and traditions are favorable to or supportive of conservation. What happens when a faith or traditional practice is inherently environmentally destructive or conflicts with biodiversity conservation objectives (an example would be the hunting or overharvesting of certain "endangered" species for religious ceremonies)? Working with groups to develop an ethic can be one way to work around this. ARC has worked on growing palms sustainably for Palm Sunday. Bromeliads are sacred orchids in Mayan and Catholic traditions – ARC is also working on cooperative agricultural practices.

Closing Statements

Alice Macharia, JGI: We need to be good listeners. Start doing quickly, but we need to step back and listen to answers within.

Martin Palmer, ARC: I couldn't agree more about timescale side of things. Sikhs work in 300-year cycles – 1999 began the cycle of creation in one effort, and worshippers began receiving saplings at the end of worship services rather than a sticky sweet candy.

Amy Gambrill, IRG: I hope we can take away the need for ongoing dialogue. We need leadership to include faith practice and traditions in local plans and projects. Put this in your project and see how it goes. And then tell us about it. One of the most interesting things we do is fail.

Natalie Bailey, ABCG: Today's discussion has filled my cup and it seems that many in the room have gained in knowledge and inspiration and feels the hope and promise of additional challenges. I appreciate everyone for sharing thoughts and beliefs.