

Values, Culture, and Spirituality: **Ecosystems Restoration Conversation Guide**

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Center for
Earth Ethics



UNITED RELIGIONS
INITIATIVE

Values, Culture, and Spirituality:

ECOSYSTEMS RESTORATION CONVERSATION GUIDE

Rooted in the wisdom from the Values, Culture, and Spirituality consultations organized by the Center for Earth Ethics to support the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, this guide has been created by the United Religions Initiative (URI) and the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) to help faith communities around the world restore their communities and their ecosystems.

Our Nature: A Culture of Caring

Spirituality and faith are elemental. Water, soil, fire and air bring substance and form to our understanding of the divine. Our traditions call us not only to care for the natural world but to learn from it, and to be in relationship with it as a source of reverence, life and beauty. Modernity has encouraged us to think and act as individuals, but as a species, it is not who we are. Indigenous knowledge and our faith traditions continually call us back to the wisdom of shared practice, reciprocity and doing the work to cultivate healthy and helping relationships with one another and all of life. When we recognize ourselves as part of nature, we remember that we have always belonged to a much bigger, more ancient story. Together, we are stronger, more creative, and more resilient. Earth restoration, therefore, is a spiritual act. Caring for Earth moves us away from isolation, into belonging and relatedness.



Our Climate Crisis, Earth Restoration

This guidebook is based upon the presupposition that nature has value in and of itself. Life in all forms is valuable and worthy of protection. But not just protection. We also need to understand why the global community is not doing more to protect nature.

To achieve sustained restoration, we must dramatically change our relationship to the land. And not only the land. What our consultations revealed is that as much as we need to repair our relationship with the Earth, we must also repair and improve relationships among people. Wherever there is a polluted river or landscape littered with trash or broken by mining, there is a community of people who have been exploited and degraded as well. We cannot ignore the relationship between the degradation of people and the degradation of ecosystems, nor can we hope to restore ecosystems unless we confront the racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism that have facilitated the damage done to the world and to one another. These issues are inter-related and require our dedicated care.

Frequently conversations on ecosystem restoration focus on mitigating the climate crisis. And while it is true that protecting ecosystems will help us keep carbon emissions beneath the 1.5°C threshold, when we only consider ecosystems as carbon-catching tools, we perpetuate the misunderstanding that ecosystems are objects and that we get to manipulate them endlessly for our own needs and benefits.

Questions about our values, culture and spirituality can help us see where we have gone astray and how we might find health and wholeness once more. *What do we value?* Acts of restoration help us to see and appreciate the relationships needed to help a system thrive. *Who are we culturally?*

Restoration calls us back to our roots. We are only able to inhabit healthy and life-affirming narratives after we make the time to revisit and repair historic harms. *How is this spiritual?* Ecosystem restoration moves us beyond ourselves. Acts of restoration help us to listen and work within Earth's natural rhythms to regenerate and nurture abundance. Together, we get to move out of isolation or displacement, toward hospitality and honorable place-making. In this way, Earth restoration celebrates our values, cultural and spirituality, calling each of us into right relationship with the vast Earth community of which we are all a part. When we restore Earth, we heal ourselves, one another, and all beings.

Your Values, Culture, and Spirituality at Work

The more we relate to nature through the lens of values, culture, and spirituality, the deeper and more sustained our actions can be. To support the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, we launched the Values, Culture, and Spirituality Consultation series. The series, along with this guidebook, reflects multi-lateral, multifaith consultations with religious, spiritual, and Indigenous groups in conversation with UN partners, advocacy groups, and local government officials, to create collaborative spaces to think more inclusively and comprehensively about ecosystem restoration work. As you work with the case studies from the series, we hope it will support you and your community as you consider the restoration work needing to happen where you live. It is time to put your values, culture, and spirituality to work!

Forming Your Consultation Circle

1

Step One

Ask, “What happened here?” and “What is happening?”

Before you begin to develop your plan, consider the history and context of the ecosystem that you want to restore. There is always a story of events and choices that led to a river being polluted or farm land being degraded. To know how to properly heal something, we need to understand the depth of the wounds that were inflicted and how the people who are on the land—both presently and historically—were wounded along the way. If we are going to bring restoration to the world, we must bring restoration to the people who occupy the land and who will be the ones doing the work of maintaining its wellbeing. Initial questions and considerations:

1. Which ecosystem near you needs restoration? A river? A forest? Depleted farmland? An abandoned lot? If you are in a city, are there unused spaces that could be made into green spaces?
2. What are the historical issues that led to the ecosystem being degraded? Who or what has been wounded along the way?
3. If you do not know the history already, is there someone you can speak with who does? Where might you learn more about the events and choices that contributed to the present situation?
4. Who or what has been wounded along the way?
5. What efforts are currently underway to take restorative action?

2

Step Two

Ask, “Who else needs to be invited?”

If you are already feeling intimidated or overwhelmed, it is okay and completely understandable. The questions in Step One are to help create a landscape analysis of not only the ecosystem but also all the people who are—or should be—involved in restoration efforts. The consultation series and case studies (see pages 7–11) illustrate that conversations are the first step towards action. We begin by sharing our concern, then listening. We ask questions and listen some more. In healthy communities we find space to share, to work, to grieve, to celebrate, and ultimately to create change. Together, we find strength and generate power. Ecological restoration needs to be inclusive, equitable, and accessible if it is going to have the sustained impact we desire. So, let’s take this further with a few more questions and considerations:

Questions to ask:

1. Which individuals or groups are already involved in (or living near) the ecosystem you wish to restore?
2. Are there individuals or groups who need to be included but are not yet represented?
3. Are there current threats to the ecosystem you have identified? If so, what are they and who is responsible for them?
4. How can your restoration efforts offer inclusivity, equity and accessibility to humans and to all other creatures and species?

Forming Your Consultation Circle

3

Step Three

Listening for Values, Culture, and Spirituality

Forming a consultation that reflects what you are learning in the steps above will help you form relationships with all the other people working on the issue. It will also—and this is very important—bring a values, culture, spirituality framework to how you are approaching the work. To heal the land, air and water, we need to do the work of healing the people and honoring our shared histories. These consultations are designed to do just that. It is important for a wide array of voices and perspectives to be heard. In addition to the questions above, as you invite others to your consultation team, embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion by considering gender balance, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Consultation partners and invited speakers should include some combination of these roles:

- Indigenous representative, community-based elder, and/or local historian
- Naturalist, Ecologist, local environmental advocate, and/or traditional ecological knowledge-holder
- Community Stakeholder (farmer, business-person, educator, etc)
- Local, state, and/or regional government representative
- United Nations and/or other international NGO representative
- Community faith leader, theologian, and/or faith based organization representative

4

Step Four

Recommended Consultation Structure

There is no right way to host a consultation. What matters is gathering people together to have a conversation that isn't already happening. To help you think about how a consultation might look, we've provided a recommended "run-of-show." Feel free to adjust it as needed to fit the format and style of consultation that you want to have.

- Welcome and introductions (5 MINUTES)
- Opening presentation by moderator (5 MINUTES)
- Opening questions: Specific question to each speaker to frame the issue from their own perspective/expertise (20 MINUTES).
 - Be ready for a short follow-up question if more information is needed, or initial answer is too short
- First question to everyone: Each speaker is asked to answer the same general question, such as *"Why are values, cultures, and spirituality important in ecosystem restoration work?"* (15 MINUTES)
- Second question to everyone: Each speaker is asked to address a question that takes the topic to a deeper place, such as *"How do we build relationships and trust between faith actors and non-faith actors?"* (15 MINUTES)
- Closing questions/reponse: A final unique question to each speaker that blends their earlier remarks and potentially questions from the audience remarks: Each speaker to provide their perspective on the issue focusing more on problems/obstacles (15 MINUTES)
- Audience Q&A
- Closing remarks (2 MINUTES)

Hosting Your Consultation

So much of this process is about building community and strengthening relationships. Every consultation done for the Values, Spirituality, and Culture series happened virtually. It was a way of gathering people from around the world. For your consultation, you may wish to consider a similar format (especially considering local Covid-19 protocols and comfort levels). You might also consider a hybrid model with some participants online and some in-person. If you host the consultation in-person, we recommend everyone seated in a circle (if possible) to create a feeling of community and equality. We also recommend that you provide food and give ample time for follow up conversations. 🌱

Share Your Story!

How did it go?

We would love to hear about your conversation and we want to share your projects across the network of other faith groups who are restoring ecosystems in their communities. To be included on the database, please provide the details of your project here:

[SUBMIT YOUR STORY](#)



Case Study on AIR

ST. JAMES PARISH, LOUISIANA, USA

Location & Concern St. James Parish, or, “Cancer Alley,” is a 80-mile stretch along the Mississippi River and the location of 150 petrochemical plants and refineries. In addition to respiratory issues for many, and rashes on children who spend a lot of time outside, cancer is 50% higher in this region than other parts of the country.

Consultation Partners Rise St. James (Faith-based organization); Ponca Nations (Indigenous activists); Beyond Plastic (NGO); and CIEL (Advocacy).

Analysis

- **Systemic injustice:** the plastic industry heavily tied to the fossil fuel industry which uses its money and power to lobby against regulations.
- **Power imbalance:** regulatory agencies have demonstrated a willingness to listen to the corporations rather than those people who are suffering.
- **Build coalitions:** grassroots strength is built by bringing together a wide array of supporters, non-profits, and agencies to build power and agency.
- **Dismantle lies:** it is important to educate the public about the impacts of heavy industry and fossil fuels in order to dismantle lies such as, “the facilities are good for the economy” or “this is the only path for our community if we want jobs.”
- **Reparations & accountability:** there must be money and resources directed to those who have suffered at the hands of corporate negligence; and the polluters must be held to account for the harm they cause to people and planet.

Teachings on Values, Culture & Spirituality

Values: Local and global governments must emphasize clean water, clean air and healthy environments as human rights. Poisoning the Earth is poisoning ourselves.

Culture: Losing one’s home to climate changes can be equated to losing a part of one’s identity. Preserving and restoring land pays homage to our ancestors and where we came from.

Spirituality: The passion and courage to do what is right can be found through faith.

Lessons Learned & Passed On

1. We cannot and should not differentiate ourselves from nature. Align human law with natural law.
2. Imbalances of power can support classism and racism. We should acknowledge differences but find strength in unity to solve community problems.
3. Pollution (and climate change) transcends racial, economic and social boundaries but some suffer more than others. The work of environmental justice is to bring healing to those who suffer first and worst.
4. Resistance is the first step towards restoration. Creating change begins by learning what is wrong and learning what you can do about it.

Right Now: Thanks to persistent pressure from advocacy groups such as Rise St. James, Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Healthy Gulf, and many more, a federal judge put a stay on a new petrochemical plant, the Sunshine Project, that would emit 13.6 million tons of greenhouse gasses annually.

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Case Study on WATER

RIVER YAMUNA, INDIA

Location & Concern Despite the River Yamuna being venerated by Hindus worldwide, it is so heavily polluted, that it is considered dead, and no life can exist in it. The river begins in the Himalayas and flows to Delhi where the water is diverted and replaced with untreated sewage. This water, which contains dangerous levels of toxic chemicals, is used in worship and rituals. Despite high profile campaigns, the plight of the Yamuna is no closer to being resolved.

Consultation Partners UNEP India (UN Agency); the Sri Radha Raman Temple (Faith Group); ICLEI South Asia (local governments representative); environmental advocates and legal counsel (Legal representative).

Analysis

- **Legal continuity:** the River Yamuna passes through different states; each state makes its own laws, so protecting the entire river is challenging. The Indian Supreme Court makes declarations but local communities are left to manage it on their own. Local communities need more power and resources to achieve these goals.
- **Urgency & growth:** rapid city growth with little urban planning has led to river, land, and broader ecosystem degradation.
- **Role of religious education & spiritual practice:** respect for Yamuna has been shaped by millennia; urbanization has led to loss of tradition.
- **Competition vs Cooperation:** faith, economic, and political leaders grabbing at power.
- **Questioning “personhood”:** companies are given rights, but rights of nature are questioned.

Teachings on Values, Culture & Spirituality

Values: Faith and science are both valuable and offer solutions. They do not need to be at odds but can instead inform and strengthen one another.

Culture: Losing touch with traditional and ecological knowledge has helped facilitate a more extractive and destructive orientation towards the River Yamuna.

Spirituality: Rituals performed respectfully can help bridge the modern disconnect between humanity and the sacred, and can lead towards ecological care and ecosystem restoration.

Lessons Learned & Passed On

1. The River Yamuna has lost its cultural and spiritual connection with many of the people who live on its banks and depend on its water, which in part, has led to it being polluted and desecrated.
2. Recognize the role of faith traditions to inspire and motivate people’s care for nature. Faith leaders need to be included in conversations about sustainable development so traditional wisdom is also honored.
3. Encourage faith leaders to converse with other leaders and elected officials. Faith-based institutions have demonstrated the ability to undertake large development projects effectively.
4. Community-based conservation practices revitalize cultural heritage and cultivate cultural continuity by demonstrating the connection between humans and nature and culture.

Right Now: The national government has taken up flood mitigation initiatives which could provide some river protection. Yamuna Biodiversity Park is a restoration project that significantly expands a previous floodplain while also preserving native flora and fauna.

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Case Study on CITIES

MOMBASA, KENYA

Location & Concern Urban areas, full of life, are critical ecosystems requiring care as they become more overwhelmed by people and pollution. Mombasa is a dense, coastal city on the Indian Ocean, subject to high temperatures and in need of shade and green spaces. The city routinely floods after heavy rains, creating public health concerns with high rates of malaria and cholera. Christian, Muslim, and Hindu faith communities are working to establish green spaces and to expand mangrove and coral reef restoration efforts.

Consultation Partners Local faith representatives; World Evangelical Alliance (Faith NGO); Brain Youth Group (local NGO); and Environmental consultant.

Analysis

- **Echoes of colonization:** historic city planning racially and economically segregated access to green spaces.
- **Racial segregation:** less than 3% of Mombasa's land is publicly accessible green space; generations are disconnected from land, nature, ancestors and beliefs.
- **"Both/and" compromises:** Due to population growth, more housing is being constructed. Green spaces should be included in the design.
- **Urban planning:** expanding cities and rapid population growth must include equitable practices and provide green space.
- **Think global/act local:** restoration efforts are felt by the community & the world (i.e., one mangrove tree absorbs 10 times more carbon than other trees).

Teachings on Values, Culture & Spirituality

Values: Everyone is entitled to just, equitable cities with accessible green space.

Culture: Pride of what makes us unique and a sense of belonging motivates us to protect our cities and green spaces.

Spirituality: People can find spiritual solace and comfort by having easy access to sacred and green spaces.

Lessons Learned & Passed On

1. We are dependent on natural and urban environments, in our creation stories and daily lives. Design natural and urban spaces to work together (i.e. green spaces provide cooling and increase livability).
2. Intergenerational participation in restoration projects passes ecological and local knowledge from one generation to the next.
3. Faith-owned properties are abundant in many cities. Ask faith communities to help steer urban design and development towards the common good.
4. In 1997, after destructive El Nino rains, residents who were experiencing hard times cut down mangroves to sell as firewood. More recently, hot water and waste disposal threaten replanted mangroves. Stakeholder education ensures project awareness and success.

Right Now: Mombasa is incorporating these lessons to become a "15-Minute City." The design strategy makes it so that people don't need to walk more than 15-minutes to get everything they need, which promotes both accessibility and efficiency.

Watch the Video



Case Study on SPECIES

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

Location & Concern In the Philippines, the Bagobo Tagabawa people are working with scientists and foundations to protect the critically endangered Philippine Eagle, a beloved relative in their community. The tribe's "forest guardians" are using tracking equipment to gather data on the eagles.

Consultation Partners Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe (Indigenous Representatives); DiversEarth (NGO); Philippine Eagle Foundation (Conservation NGO); Indigenous Peoples Rights International (NGO).

Analysis

- **Nature's guardians:** there are more than 460 million Indigenous people living around the world but only about 10% have legal recognition of their lands.
- **Life in harmony:** for those living in close relationship with nature and practicing traditional knowledge, the land is a hospital, a market, and a source of sacred relationships.
- **Healing relationships:** when we recognize that we are nature, we claim responsibility in keeping Earth and all creatures healthy for generations to come.
- **Combining strengths:** when conservation, science and Indigenous practices are combined, there is greater potential for the restoration project to succeed.
- **Unjust eviction:** many tribes have been unjustly evicted from their lands and prohibited from completing cultural practices, many of which promote balanced & healthy ecosystems (i.e. controlled forest fires).

Teachings on Values, Culture & Spirituality

Values: For Indigenous communities, protecting home means protecting anything within the ancestral domain—animals and natural resources are part of home and heritage.

Culture: Indigenous conservation practices are culturally rooted and maintained by tribal elders and community members.

Spirituality: We are nature; and the forest is not "ours." When this understanding is broken, it is our sacred task to repair and restore the ecosystem and our relationship to it.

Lessons Learned & Passed On

1. Solutions must be holistic and not generalized. Place-based practices are needed. Understanding the cultural significance of a species can help us better protect it as part of our daily routines.
2. Culture-based governance approaches can capture how local communities see, understand and relate to biodiversity. Science-based knowledge and tools can be used in support of place-based conservation (e.g. forest guardians using tracking equipment to gather data on the eagles).
3. The rights of Indigenous communities must be recognized. Lands taken away from Indigenous people for development projects often leads to poverty and hunger for those who live, and stark biodiversity loss.

Right Now: The collaboration of Indigenous knowledge and conservation science continues to encourage collaboration with local government and NGOs to enhance collective understanding and to implement place-based, nature-based solutions. There are at present more than 300 eagles benefiting from the protection provided by forest guardians.

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Case Study on FOOD

AMMAN, JORDAN

Location & Concern Along with its neighbors in the Fertile Crescent, Jordan is home to some of the first domesticated crops and irrigation systems, which laid the foundation for modern agriculture. Presently, Jordan has merely one-fifth of the water it needs as the country continues to welcome many climate migrants and refugees from war.

Consultation Partners Governmental leaders; GlobalOne (International NGO); Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (academia); TAYYŪN (local non-profit); and local activists.

Analysis

- **Ecosystems and culture:** our landscape significantly influences our identities and cultures, and the very food we eat.
- **Connectivity:** we cannot separate the degradation of the land and water from our treatment of one another.
- **Human Impacts:** upon examining the changes in the Jordanian landscape throughout history, it is clear that the cycle of aridity is human induced and influenced by the types of plants grown.
- **Faith and Ethics:** sacred texts and stories can propose a code of ethics. When we lose our connection to these ethics, it erodes morality.
- **Impacts of Colonialism:** historical narratives and records can reveal patterns of colonialism and imperialism which facilitated biodiversity loss.
- **Teamwork:** a common agenda and coordination among governments, institutions, NGOs, and individuals is essential.

Teachings on Values, Culture & Spirituality

Values: Our relationship with the environment is a reflection of how we value ourselves and other human beings. Restoring the environment is a manifestation of our care and love for each other.

Culture: The ancient (pre-Islamic) Hema system of conservation and growing certain plants is culturally-rooted, still offering guidance in the region, but is under threat by modern practices of over-consumption and materialism.

Spirituality: Nature allows us to understand religious concepts discussed in sacred texts, such as new beginnings and caring of God's creations. Our interactions with nature teach us about the world and our role in it.

Lessons Learned & Passed On

1. Food is a reminder that we need each other and other creatures for life to continue on.
2. One of our best strategies to combat food insecurity is to rebuild natural ecosystems. They are self-sustaining and stabilize soil fertility, water cycles, and pest-control mechanisms.
3. Looking at past approaches holds equal value with developing new innovations. It is through history that we can analyze what works and what does not.
4. Start by building networks around shared values. Begin with unity and understanding to help define our relationship with life and nature.

Right Now: Through more intentional efforts to establish shared values, the people of Jordan are recognizing the importance of embracing new and old, scientific, and faith-based approaches. Collectively these understandings reveal that healthy ecosystems are the foundation for healthy food and healthy people.

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CREDITS

This guide was created by the United Religions Initiative and the Center for Earth Ethics:

The Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) works at the intersection of values, ethics and ecology to confront the climate crisis. CEE works to change the dominant value system from one based on short-term material gain—no matter the pollution, depletion and inequity that result—to one based on the long-term health of the whole community of life. Through education, convening and advocacy, we engage individuals and communities to raise public consciousness as well as shift policy and culture.

Learn more at centerforearthethics.org

The United Religions Initiative (URI) is an international, interfaith organization supporting grassroots efforts to grow peace, justice and healing. Diverse groups, called Cooperation Circles (CCs), take up Earth restoration efforts, peace-building, and direct action to create safer, healthier, and more resilient communities. Using its broad network of CCs around the world, URI provides education, shares best practices, and promotes local interfaith action as integral to solving global and systemic problems. There are more than 1,000 CCs doing work in over 100 countries. URI is a non-profit and non-governmental organization with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Learn more about URI at uri.org

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