Spirit of Place: Themes and Issues

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In June 2025, the Center for Earth Ethics will bring our climate training to the Hudson Valley. "Spirit of Place: A Hudson Valley Climate Training" will address climate science and policy, bioregionalism, local watershed and foodshed issues, eco-justice initiatives, and the place-based ways religious and spiritual communities are responding to our ecological crisis. We will share skills to offer spiritual support and pastoral care, co-create ritual and ceremony, communicate science through an ethical lens, and learn from the land and water. We also hope the training will foster networking and collaboration, leaving participants more resourced and connected for the journey ahead. Below are some of the core themes and issues we plan to address.

The Natural and Biocultural Heritage of the Hudson Valley

The Hudson River begins at a small lake—Lake Tear of the Clouds—in the Adirondacks Mountains. It flows south for 315 miles, fed by approximately 65 major tributaries and hundreds of tributary streams, and ends in the Atlantic Ocean at New York Harbor. One of the original names for the river, given by the Mohican Peoples, was *Mahicantuck*—often translated as "river that flows two ways" because the Hudson is a tidal estuary, with salty ocean water on high tides reaching as far north as Poughkeepsie. The river has been a powerful life-sustaining force for both people and hundreds of other species since time immemorial.[1]

The Hudson River watershed includes almost 25 percent of New York State's land area, and the "Hudson Valley" is generally considered to stretch from Albany south to Yonkers, encompassing 10 counties. The largest tributary is the Mohawk River, which flows in at Cohoes, near Albany. Other tributaries include Esopus Creek, Catskill Creek, Opalescent River, Rondout Creek, and Wallkill River. The region's habitats are home to more than 2,000 different species of plants and animals, as well as nearly 90 percent of all the biodiversity in New York.[2] The Dutch were the primary initial colonizers of this region, and the river's name comes from the Englishman Henry

Hudson, who sailed into this region in 1609 on the *De Halve Maen* (*The Half Moon*) under the sponsorship of the Dutch East India Company.[3]

This river valley is the original homeland of many Indigenous Peoples, some of whom moved around and overlapped with each other. They include the Mohican, Lenape, Wappinger, Schaghticoke, and Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Onondaga, Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca) peoples.[4] Umbrella terms that have been used to describe Indigenous peoples and cultures of this regions include Algonquin and Iroquois, but most Indigenous peoples have returned to using names that come from their own languages, even if they or others sometimes also use other terms. Of course, it is wise to check with the people themselves to understand protocols and meanings.

The original biocultural heritage of this region is kept by those Indigenous communities in their own ways, including language, music, ceremonies, stories, and traditional ecological knowledge. Other cultural forms also have grown out of the relationship between people and land over time. One notable example is the nineteenth-century Hudson River School of landscape painters (including Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, and Frederick Church), whose depictions both reflected and inspired aspects of the mainstream environmental protection movement. This was dramatically illustrated in the landmark Storm King case in 1966, when Yale art historian Vincent Scully testified in favor of the Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference against Con Ed's plan to build a power plant in the iconic landscape, saying it "strongly reminds me of some of the natural formations which marked the sacred sites in Greece and signaled the presence of the Gods."[5]

The creativity continues to flow from the mix of peoples that have related to the land here. This is a rich heritage itself, from the Woodstock Music and Art Fair of 1969 (actually held further west in what is now Bethel Woods), to the Fiddle and Dance Camps at the Ashokan Field Campus -- which later became the Ashokan Center-- where "Ashokan Farewell" was first played by Jay Unger (the original composer) and his wife Molly Mason as a goodnight waltz.[6] One very current example is the Fish Migration Festival, which coincides with the exact dates of our gathering.[7] In calling for the Festival, Hudson Riverkeeper Tracy Brown described this current fish migration—when Atlantic sturgeon, American eel, striped bass, American shad, and river herring all journey upriver (as they have for centuries)—as an event akin to the great migration on the Serengeti, only happening just beneath the surface of the water.

Storm King

Scenic Hudson Preservation Council v. Federal Power Commission (1965)

In 1962, a determined group of local citizens met in Westchester County to organize opposition to Consolidated Edison's effort "to build what would be the world's largest pumped-storage hydroelectric plant" on Storm King Mountain.[8]

Con Ed planned to gouge a gigantic wedge out of the 1340-foot peak, which dominates the west bank of the Hudson south of Cornwall-on-Hudson, as well as install an eight-billion-gallon reservoir at its summit. The opponents, dubbing themselves the "Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference," began a seemingly quixotic public relations and legal campaign against the plan.

Despite early losses in front of the Federal Power Commission and in the courts, Scenic Hudson, which quickly attracted new members and support from the Hudson Valley and beyond, won a historic legal victory in 1965 when the Second Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the group could sue to stop the plant. "It was the first time citizens were granted the right to sue … to protect the environment, in a case based on aesthetic and environmental factors."[9]

Con Ed only abandoned its plan in 1979, when it agreed to cede the Storm King site to the state. The utility also gave up plans for another Hudson River plant but did source hydroelectricity from the Mohawk River via agreements with Niagara-Mohawk Power.[10] But for many, the "Scenic Hudson Decision" in the Storm King case was significant, inspiring environmental movement-building toward the major legislation of the early 1970s and beyond.

Learning In and From the Spirit of Place

Historically and traditionally, human cultures have grounded ways of knowing and learning in the practice of deep and sustained attention to the land. Understanding patterns of natural laws and systems, and the specific intricacies of local ecosystems, has been the basis of both physical survival as well as the formation of collective values, ethics, and spiritual worldviews. Ethical principles around interconnectedness and reciprocity, articulated through stories of the land and taught to new generations through direct experiences with the land.

Indigenous educator and author Gregory Cajete describes Indigenous ways of knowing as rooting "the entire tree of knowledge in the soil of direct physical and perceptual experience of the earth. In other words, to know yourself you must first know the earth"[11]

On average, Americans now spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors.[12] We spend approximately seven hours and three minutes online a day—adding up to more than 17 years of our adult lives over a lifetime.[13] In 2024 nearly half of all teenagers reported being online "almost constantly."[14]

Inside and online for so much of our lives, it is no surprise that we are losing our capacity for attention to the land. The results of this ecological alienation and illiteracy will continue to unfold—with profound and nuanced implications for our psyches, our collective spiritual and cultural worldviews, our communities, and the world at large.

Many of us in Western industrial cultures are being called back to understanding the land as our teacher through Indigenous teachings as well as through Western articulations such as the Gaia hypothesis, deep ecology, creation care, eco-literacy, and bioregionalism—or through the simple example and generosity of others who show the way.

Learning directly from the land opens up opportunities not only for intellectual understanding of natural systems, but also for the emotional and spiritual experience of authentically sensing the reality of interrelatedness. “The sacredness of land is first and foremost an emotional experience … the basic premise—that the Universe and each thing in it is alive and has personality—is an attitude of experience and not an intellectual presupposition or logical conclusion," writes Indigenous author and theologian Vine Deloria Jr.[15]

The beneficence of this approach is slowly beginning to be acknowledged by Western science. A significant body of research documents the effects of “being in nature” on our physical and emotional wellbeing and studies on the experience of awe—often in direct experiences with nature—are correlated with an increased sense of being part of “something bigger than oneself,” higher rates of empathy, and the desire to contribute to the collective good.[16]

Some faith communities around the country, such as those participating in the Wild Church Network, are bringing their services outside, conceiving of communion with nature as a form of spiritual practice. Buddhist communities, such as those in Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village tradition, or an increasing number of Ecodharma centers around the world, are addressing the ecological crisis with the wisdom of Buddhist teachings, including conducting their meditation practices outside, as the Buddha so often did. There are compelling examples from other traditions, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Secular Humanism.

Bioregionalism, Public Trust, and the Rights of Nature

Bioregionalism, a movement and field of thought that does not fit into a single definition, has been described as a call for people and communities to fit themselves into, and adapt to, the ecological characteristics of the region they inhabit. Author and bioregionalist Judith Plant explains it as “fitting ourselves to a particular place, not fitting a place to our pre-determined tastes … living within the limits and the gifts provided by a place.”[17]

The term "bioregionalism" was popularized in the 1970s as a response to the limitations of mainstream Western environmentalism. "Rather than relying on fragmented policies or distant, top-down conservation efforts, bioregionalism offers a grounded response to ecological crisis,"[18] asking us to reimagine our identities and communities in relationship to the contours and characteristics of land and water, aligning human life with natural systems that sustain it.

"Carrying out a bioregional lifestyle is to apply reinhabitory directions to the basic necessities of life," says bioregionalist Peter Berg. "Where does my food come from? What's my relationship to the water that I use? What's my relationship to the soil? What's my relationship to native ecosystems? ... Am I learning about the life-systems of the place where I live and about how my own life ultimately depends on them? Am I learning how to live in a place in a long-term, sustainable way with bioregional self-reliance as a guide?"[19]

Bioregionalism is among several ways of thinking that may seem new, but are actually quite old, charged with the power of ancient understandings. Another example is the concept of public trust. The public trust doctrine is an underpinning of environmental law that requires the state to manage certain public resources—primarily waterways—for the benefit of the public.[20] Some contemporary voices (like the plaintiff organization, Our Children's Trust, in the *Juliana v United States* case) argue that in this time of extreme global environmental risk, this doctrine should be expanded to include the atmosphere.[21] As some plan to mark "No Kings Day" on June 14, 2025, we can recall that the public trust doctrine has ancient roots in the Magna Carta, the 1215 historic agreement forced upon King John in England, which is emblematic of limitations on the power of a monarch (or would-be-monarch).[22]

The "Rights of Nature" movement appeals to many people concerned about the environment because it is a radical way to finally account for the agency and aliveness of natural entities like rivers. Of course, this movement draws a lot of its moral authority from the fact that Indigenous peoples always held that worldview, even if it was not described in terms of "rights." The great thinker Thomas Berry, who loved and lived in the Hudson Valley, drew from their wisdom when he wrote "every being has rights to be recognized and revered. Trees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, mountains have mountain rights. So too with the entire range of beings throughout the universe. All rights are limited and relative."[23]

The Global Climate Crisis and Ecological Impacts on the Hudson Valley

This valley, like regions around the world, is already experiencing the higher average temperatures and extreme weather events that are the hallmarks of climate change. Careful observation, including by the scientists that make up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change, has shown that the main cause of the current change in climate is greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.[24]

Some of the effects in this region are the result of effects in other parts of our interconnected global environment. Sea level on the Hudson River has already risen about a foot in the past century due to global ice melt (which is particularly dramatic in Greenland) as well as from thermal expansion from rising water temperatures.[25] It is currently predicted to rise six feet or more by the end of this century. This water rise will be accompanied by increased salinity travelling further north in the river, which could dramatically affect river species as well as the many communities that rely on the river for tap water—including corroding pipes and causing breakdown of water treatment systems.[26]

Earth scientists also predict that New York State will experience increased heat, precipitation and flooding in winter and spring, as well as increased drought—and accompanying fire danger—in summer and fall.[27] They predict that precipitation will occur largely through "cloudburst" storms, which are sudden localized rainfall events that can cause flash flooding within minutes. These storms bring a host of challenges beyond flash flooding, including possible dam failures, soil erosion, and challenges to agriculture.[28] Although many climate change impacts are dramatic and obvious, many more are subtle, with unknown long-term consequences. The degree to which this trajectory continues depends on whether or not we change our ways.

Climate and Environmental Justice

Underlying our global climate crisis is the moral issue that those who are being hurt first and worst are those who have done the least to cause it and have the least resources to adapt and recover.

Within the U.S., the wealthiest 10 percent pollute 16 times more than the poorest 10 percent, reflecting lifestyles that involve more consumption of all kinds, including travel.[29] This segment of society also is more likely to hold financial investments in the systems that drive practices of depletion, extraction, and combustion that are accelerating the crisis. When legislative or policy solutions to change those systems are proposed, powerful interest groups push back, relying on donations from stakeholders and on public apathy to maintain the status quo.

Low-income communities are the most grievously impacted by climate change but have the least economic and political power to adapt to it. Increased heat waves, which kill more people annually than any other climate-related disaster[30]—and are linked to higher levels of stress,

anger, fatigue, sleep problems, and aggression[31]—are most severe in urban areas with less tree cover.[32] In the face of stronger storms and floods, those living in these communities are also those least able to afford to move to safer ground, to access food and water during shortages, to find new homes, or to access resources necessary to survive.

Long histories and present realities of race-based discrimination play a significant role in this pattern. Among low-income communities, those who are Black, Indigenous or other "people of color" not only tend to have less access to nature but also have long been targeted for the location of toxic industrial plants and congested roadways. As documented by many studies, including the historic *Toxic Wastes and Race* report by the United Church of Christ in 1987, this has real consequences for health and well-being.[33] A recent study from George Washington University reports that nationally, communities of color are experiencing 7.5 times higher pediatric asthma rates and 1.3 times higher mortality rates due to air pollution.[34]

These justice issues have a global dimension. Among all nation-states, the United States was the top source of greenhouse gas emissions between 1887 and 2005. Although China now holds that distinction, the U.S. still high the highest per capita emissions and is responsible for the most historical emissions.[35] It is worth noting as well that the U.S. has been influential in promoting a development model that has been emulated around the world and is a major site of consumption (and ownership of production) of many of the goods produced in China and other high emitting nations. The most vulnerable populations in the world are those in developing nations where some populations are very low consuming (and in some cases do not even have electricity) yet are experiencing serious hardships due changing weather patterns due to emissions from elsewhere.[36] This makes it even more important that the Hudson Valley region rises to the occasion to leadership in forging a better way.

Pollution of Water and Air

Many Hudson Valley communities are not only dealing with the effects of climate change, they also are engaged in environmental justice struggles against the toxic pollution of water, soil, and air.

One major example of this is the scourge of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—known as PFAS—which have been found in drinking water of many Hudson Valley communities, in sewage sludge that farmers have been encouraged to use as fertilizer, and in the Hudson River itself.[37] PFAS are a category of "forever chemicals," a large group of chemicals that do not easily break down and therefore remain in the ecosystem for decades, bioaccumulating in the tissue of plants, humans, and other animals. Thousands of different PFAS are commonly used in

consumer, commercial, and industrial products, and these chemicals end up in the water, air, soil, plants, and in our bloodstreams.[38] Health effects from PFAS include reproductive, developmental, immune system, and hormonal effects as well as increased risk of certain cancers.[39] Nearly 200 of New York's drinking water systems, providing tap water for approximately 1.3 million people, have tested PFAS levels ranging from 4 ppt to 10 ppt (the EPA sets the federal limit at 4 ppt in drinking water).[40]

In Newburgh, New York, residents have advocated for access to clean water for years. Between the early 1990s and 2016, residents were drinking PFAS-contaminated tap water, which had been running off from Stewart Air National Guard Base into Washington Lake, the city's primary drinking water reservoir. A 2016-2017 study by the New York Department of Health found PFAS levels in the blood of Newburg's residents to be nearly four times the national average.[41]

The Hudson River also has been subjected to a high level of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) pollution, another category of "forever chemicals" that threaten all life within and along the river. PCBs are known carcinogens and linked to reproductive, immune system, neurological, and endocrine effects.[42] Over the course of 30 years beginning in 1947, General Electric dumped approximately 1.3 million pounds of PCBs into the river from plants in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls.[43] Even after the dumping stopped, runoff from the Hudson Falls plant continued to pollute the Hudson. In 1984, a 200-mile stretch of the river was declared a Superfund site, one of the nation's largest. Though GE was ordered to remove 2.7 million cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sediment from the river, contamination levels still remain dangerously high.[44] Friends of a Clean Hudson coalition, Riverkeeper, and other groups continue to advocate for remediation and restoration of the river.

Air quality is another concern. New York state has 10 incinerators for burning trash, more than any other state.[45] Dutchess County burns about 45 percent of its trash at a Poughkeepsie incinerator along the Hudson. Incinerators produce both a significant amount of greenhouse gases as well as other toxins, including lead, mercury, cadmium, hydrochloric acid, and nitrogen oxides. They also produce toxic ash. The Peekskill and Poughkeepsie incinerators send to landfills 30 pounds of toxic ash for every 100 pounds of trash burned.

Communities have waged powerful climate and environmental justice campaigns throughout the region. For example, in 2024, after years of organizing, Newburgh environmental justice advocates celebrated the announcement that Danskammer Energy was withdrawing its plans to build a new methane gas facility in Newburg, New York.[46] Fighting air and water pollution often includes this kind of defensive work, but there is also a proactive and positive side, as communities come together to envision ways to live in harmony with nature that also result in flourishing local economies.

Our Animal and Plant Relatives, a.k.a. Biodiversity

The Hudson Valley is home to more than 2,000 different species. Many are under threat from changing weather patterns (which affect their ability to find food, hatch eggs, etc.) as well as from pollution and habitat loss from human development, including dams.

This reflects a global trend. In 2020 scientists reported that in each year during the last century we lost the same number of species typically lost in previous 100-year periods, with extinction rates continuing to accelerate.[47] On a national level, extinction rates also are rising. For example, a 2025 Cornell University study found that approximately one third of all American bird species are "of high or moderate concern due to low populations, declining trends, or other threats,"[48] and that "birds are declining most severely where they are most abundant—the very places where they should be thriving."[49] A World Wildlife Fund study showed that wild animal populations have declined by 69 percent since 1970.[50] Studies predict that if our current patterns remain the same, more than a third of plant and animal species could become extinct in the next 30 years.[51]

The Hudson bioregion's rich biodiversity includes river species that rely on a particular mix of fresh and salt water, as well as a particular water temperature range. Endangered Atlantic sturgeon, for example, spend most of their lives in the Atlantic but travel up the Hudson to spawn. They are known to live up to 60 years, can grow up to 14 feet long, and have been around as a species for 120 million years.[52] American eels, a species of "special concern," spend most of their lives in rivers, including the Hudson, and travel 1,000 miles to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. Elvers (young eels) then make a year-long journey back to the Hudson.[53]

Rising water temperatures in rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, are requiring species to find new habitats, and in many cases reducing their populations. [54] Many of the more than 200 species who travel the migratory pathway from the Atlantic each spring are in serious long-term decline and at risk of collapse due to this temperature rise, as well as from overfishing, habitat loss, and pollution.[55] Rising water temperatures can also reduce oxygen levels in water and contribute to harmful algae blooms—a particular threat to aquatic species.[56]

Animals that share this place range from land animals like deer, black bear, foxes and bobcats to pollinators like butterflies and honeybees. [57] Beavers are a keystone species, creating and maintaining wetland habitat that benefit many other species of life.[58] This bioregion is also one of the top four river drainages globally for turtle species richness and is the home of more species of dragonflies and damselflies than nearly anywhere else in the U.S.[59]

Let's not forget the plants and trees! Rising temperatures are changing the timing of seasonal cycles, such as when they flower and leaf. Winters are becoming milder, allowing new pests and pathogens to arrive and survive the winter, leading to predictions that they will become more damaging for both forests and agriculture, causing potential ripple effects on food supply and air quality.[60] One notable invasive species—the Emerald Ash Borer– has decimated the ash tree population in the region, creating an additional challenge for those focused on caring for forests, especially at a time when many dead trees and erratic weather make them vulnerable to fires.[61] Although this is extremely frustrating, rising awareness of ecological interrelationships is itself a gift, inviting people to make relationships with the environments around their homes.

Hudson Valley success stories show how human society can correct mistakes. The Bald Eagle, adopted as the emblem of the United States in 1782, was driven to near extinction in the mid-twentieth century. A variety of factors made them vulnerable, but the main threat was the pesticide DDT, which contaminated eagles' food sources and weakened eagles' eggshells so that their young were not viable. After its development in the 1940s, DDT was widely used until voices of moral concern about its destructive impacts—notably Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962)[62]—resulted in a 1972 ban. In 1976, the New York State Department of Environmental Conversation made a concerted effort to revive the eagle population, which was only possible because the landscape was then free from DDT. In 2007, after 34 years, the Bald Eagle was finally removed from the Endangered Species list and is thriving in the Hudson Valley today.[63]

Biodiversity reflects planetary health, and the decline of any species diminishes the wider ecosystem. The effects of biodiversity loss are wide reaching and unpredictable, for all species and for humans, threatening food security and access to clean drinking water, and worsening the spread of infectious diseases, among others. On the other hand, as Indigenous cultures have long demonstrated, honoring and taking care of our relatives in the animal and plant world can increase our well-being and sense of belonging within the places we live and share with them.

Food and Farming

One of the ways in which humans interact most intimately with other species of life is through gardening, agriculture, and foodways.

The Hudson Valley, and New York State in general, relies heavily on agriculture, with approximately 30,6500 farms in New York State, comprising 21.6 percent of the state's area.[64] In New York State, climate change has been described as "a threat multiplier for agriculture," including crop loss from flooding, heavy rainfall, and erosion; increased pest and disease

pressure; heat stress on both crops and animals; "early spring," which causes fruit trees to bloom early at risk of subsequent frost; increased potential for drought in summer and fall; and overall increased unpredictability of seasonal patterns.[65]

Farmers and farming communities already face multiple stressors, including low profit margins and food insecurity. Farmworkers face substantially more. About 50 percent of New York State farmworkers are undocumented and live with the threats of deportation and institutional violence, economic hardship, and the health effects of long days of intense physical labor.[66] Climate change is expected to exacerbate all of these conditions, with particular grave concern for farmworkers health during heat waves.

Roughly 250,000 people in the Hudson Valley already suffer from food insecurity, and climate change is predicted to add additional stress on our food supply and systems.[67] On the positive side, the movement towards regenerative agriculture and local foodways is particularly strong in this region and is an example of how land and culture can be restored together.

New York Climate-Related Policy

Like many other places around the country, policies and projects to address climate change in this region had a surge in the last decade but now are being severely challenged by the current administration.

The 2019 New York State Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA) is one of the most ambitious climate laws in the nation, with the goals of producing 70 percent of the state's energy from renewable sources by 2030 and reaching 100 percent zero-emission electricity by 2040. Disadvantaged communities were slated to receive 35-40 percent of the benefits of clean energy and energy efficiency programs rolled out across the state.[68]

Just six years later, however, New York State seems to be backing away from some goals due to "global economic issues, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical developments."[69] New York's 2026 budget allocated $1 billion for clean energy and resiliency projects, but this is a small fraction of what CLCPA promised. The biggest source of revenue for the CLCPA was supposed to be a Cap and Invest Program that was to generate $6-$12 billion per year, but Governor Hochul has delayed the program.

At the same time, the current administration in Washington, D.C. temporarily halted construction of new renewable energy projects, such as Empire Wind, which would have generated enough electricity to power 500,000 homes by 2026.[70] They also have threatened to repeal tax credits from the Inflation Reduction Act, which would increase energy project costs in New York by $20 billion.[71]

In 2024, New York State passed the Climate Change Superfund Act, modeled after the original 1980 federal Superfund law, and designed to make climate polluters pay for damages.[72] The law mandated that companies most responsible for carbon emissions between 2000 and 2024 pay $3 billion per year for 25 years to help pay for damage caused by increasing extreme weather, as well as prepare for more to come. Earlier this month, however, the federal government sued to block the New York law—as well as a similar one in Vermont.[73]

In another recent loss for statewide climate policy, state legislators in May 2025 excluded the Home Energy Affordable Transition Act (NY HEAT Act) from the state budget.[74] Organizers have been pushing the HEAT Act for years—with the aims of stopping the expansion of the state's fracked gas system and allowing companies to offer cleaner energy alternatives while simultaneously lowering heating costs for customers.

This assault on our ability to come together to address the ecological realities we live in will not necessarily prevail, but it is indeed quite fierce. It may only be defeated by a movement that draws from the deepest wells of wisdom and truth. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Lee Zeldin the Environmental Protection Agency administrator and former New York congressman, bragged that "We are driving a stake through the heart of climate-change religion." In response, Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, founder of Dayenu, a Jewish climate change organization, wrote: "I am not at all sure what 'climate-change religion' is, but I do know that Judaism, the religion Zeldin and I share, values the protection of life. In a Midrash on Genesis, G-d warns Adam and Eve 'be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world– for if you spoil it, ` no one after you to repair it (Midrah Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)."[75]

The Role of Religious and Spiritual Communities

Religious and spiritual leaders can play an essential role in helping people face the ecological crisis and come through it even stronger than they were before. Just as they have been integral to movements for social change, such as the Civil Rights Movement, faith communities can meet this moment in a way that transcend their own boundaries. People need an infusion of inspiration to turn our latent awareness of the moral and spiritual dimensions of this problem into the fuel we need to overcome it.

One important first step is recognizing the ways our own institutions have played a role in promoting worldviews that have contributed to the crisis. This itself holds power, as do all acts of repentance and renewal. As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'* (2015), "Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must

forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."[76]

Religious organizations have long played a key role in responding to disasters, such as storms, floods and wildfires.[77] While this call is more important than ever, there is also a need to deepen and expand what it means. We can draw from sacred teachings and texts to understand, contextualize, and respond to the circumstances we find ourselves in. We can help communicate the connections between deep principles and practical actions. We can provide healing and comfort to the most vulnerable. This includes Earth-honoring ceremony and ritual, as well as pastoral care and spiritual support for those experiencing intense emotions that come with facing climate change.

Overwhelming grief and anxiety, and relentless exposure to bad news, leave many feeling hopeless and stuck. And yet, climate anxiety also can be understood as a natural, healthy response to an existential threat, warning us that our survival is at stake and that we must act. "Pain for the world and love for the world are two sides of one coin," says eco-activist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy.[78] Many find that the most powerful ways to work with climate anxiety include channeling the energy into collective organizing for climate justice, making changes in our daily lives, and re-enlivening our relationships with the natural world. In this way the antidotes for climate anxiety are the same healing tools that address root causes of the crisis, and climate anxiety and grief are experiences we must collectively honor as they compel us towards transformation.

Religious and spiritual leaders can also help galvanize collective action, participating in community organizing, policy and advocacy work towards the energy transition and energy efficiency. As important as adaptation is, it will never end (and eventually become impossible) if we do not act at the level of cause in addition to the level of effect. It may not exactly be a sacred teaching, but the old saying "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" comes to mind.

Many religious and spiritual communities in this region already are taking action in ways that range from restoring habitat, to manifesting the energy transition, to addressing environmental justice, and more. For example (and please write us to add more!):

- The Freedom Plains United Presbyterian Church in Dutchess County has turned its grounds into a teaching laboratory, installing pollinator gardens that contribute to reviving local biodiversity and rain-harvesting systems that model responsible water stewardship.[79]

- The Jewish Congregation of New Paltz has replaced its oil furnace with high-efficiency heat pumps.[80]
- The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills in Kingston has improved air-sealing and insulation to curb energy waste. [81]
- Pointe of Praise Family Life Center In Kingston transformed two idle acres into a 1,386-panel community-solar farm, providing discounted electricity to more than 50 local households.[82]
- The Dominican Sisters of Hope of the Center at Mariandale in Ossining, New York, host a delegation of youth from the Stockbridge-Munsee (Mohican), who come from Wisconsin, and join in dialogue about how to center "racial and ecological justice" in how land is used, loved, owned and governed.[83]

These efforts embody Indigenous leader Dennis Martinez's insight that "ecological restoration is inseparable from cultural and spiritual restoration, and from the spiritual responsibilities of caregiving and world-renewal."[84] Land healing and soul healing are intertwined.

Our Gathering

Throughout this bioregion, many are already doing powerful work that blends different ways of knowing place and planet, heals people and land together, and speaks truth in a way that builds positive movement. Many more are inclined to do the same and would like to take the time to pay attention and learn. It is often the ones who come to learn who have the most to teach. Our gathering seeks to bring us all together in the Spirit of Place.

[1] "Tributaries & Riparian Habitat," New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (n.d.), accessed June 5, 2025, https://extapps.dec.ny.gov/docs/remediation_hudson_pdf/hrebcfII4d.pdf.

[2] "Natural Areas and Wildlife Habitat of the Hudson Valley," New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (n.d.), accessed June 2, 2025, https://extapps.dec.ny.gov/docs/remediation_hudson_pdf/hrebch3.pdf.

[3] "A Tour of New Netherland: The Half Moon," New Netherland Institute (n.d.), accessed June 9, 2025, https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/digital-exhibitions/a-tour-of-new-netherland/hudson-river/half-moon.

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