



SPIRIT OF PLACE, SPIRIT OF EARTH

An Eco-Justice Training

Core Themes and Issues

In June 2026, the Center for Earth Ethics will host “Spirit of Place, Spirit of Earth: An Eco-Justice Training” in the Hudson Valley. The gathering will be structured around the ways in which religious and spiritual communities respond to our ecological crisis. This includes voicing the truth, providing spiritual support, and practical work that can be done through buildings, land, and volunteer networks. It includes a shift in mindset toward a sustained reciprocal relationship with the ecosystem the community inhabits. We hope this gathering will provide resources for all of these aspects of the work ahead. We look forward to a time of mutual sharing in which we all learn from each other, and we all leave feeling more connected and supported. Below are some of the core themes and issues we will address.

The Current Realities of Climate Change

The training will include an introduction to the current state of the climate crisis, focusing on scientific evidence, recent occurrences of extreme weather events, how we know what causes them, and how we can collectively respond.

The effects of climate change overlap and are interwoven with other challenges that our ecosystems are facing such as dramatic losses of plant and animal populations, the build-up of pollutants in our land, air, and waters, and the overall degradation of soil and ocean health. These will be acknowledged, with attention to the way in which intimate knowledge of a place can be a portal to understanding of the way the laws of nature function in the biosphere as a whole.

Dialogue between Science and Spirituality, and Different Ways of Knowing

What most think of as “science,” “western science” or the “scientific method” is an important aspect of how we understand our ecological crises and how to respond. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)—

knowledge rooted in Indigenous communities and passed down through generations – is also important to our collective understanding of what is happening. “Both Western science and traditional ecological knowledge are methods of reading the land. That’s where they come together,” says Robin Wall Kimmerer, a biologist, member of Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and mother. “But they’re reading the land in different ways. Scientists use the intellect and the senses, usually enhanced by technology... [I]ndigenous knowledge, too, is based on observation, on experiment. The difference is that it includes spiritual relationships and spiritual explanations.”¹

In the traditional way of learning, instead of conducting a tightly controlled experiment, you interact with the being in question—with that plant, with that stream. And you watch what happens to everything around it, too. The idea is to pay attention to the living world as if it were a spider’s web: when you touch one part, the whole web responds. Experimental, hypothesis-driven science looks just at that one point you touched. Another important difference is that science tends to want to make universal statements, whereas to the Indigenous way of thinking, what’s happening between two organisms is always particular and localized, unique in space and time.²

Climate and Environmental Justice

Underlying our global climate crisis is the moral issue that those who are being hurt first and worst are generally those who have done the least to cause it and have the least resources to adapt and recover. For example, 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.³ This segment of society is also 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.

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.⁴

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. is still the greatest source of per capita emissions and is responsible for the most historical emissions.⁵ By contrast, the entire continent of Africa is responsible for just about 4 percent of climate-changing emissions yet will bear a large amount of suffering from heat waves and other impacts that are caused by the cumulative emissions from elsewhere.⁶ Although nation-states are only one way to categorize the peoples of the world, national and subnational policymaking are among the most effective ways to change the systems that are causing the problem.

Because climate change gets cumulatively worse over time if its causes are not addressed, it is very much a generational justice issue, and one that calls us to think on a longer time frame. We must bring future generations to mind as we consider our actions today. Of course, this includes the youth who are currently with us, and it also includes those yet to come.

Moral concern for other species and biodiversity is part of environmental and climate justice. The first of the “17 Principles of Environmental Justice,” which were created by the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit of 1991, “affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity, and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from environmental destruction.”⁷

Rights of Nature

While working to ensure environmental and climate justice, we are also called to think about the way our economic, legal, and political systems conceive of other-than human beings such as rivers, forests, mountains and other distinct ecosystems as well as other species? The “rights of nature” movement is advocating for—and in numerous instances making strides toward—legal status for natural entities as a way in which to protect them. Of course, this movement draws a lot of its moral authority from the fact Indigenous peoples have 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. “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,” he wrote. “So too with the entire range of beings throughout the universe. All rights are limited and relative.”⁸

The “right to a healthy environment” and green amendment movement are other ways in which nature is brought into the circle of moral concern.⁹ While that approach rests on the ways in which every human being deserves to live within a healthy web of life, rather than the intrinsic rights of nature, they align in many ways. As whole ecosystems are degraded and many species are threatened with extinction both from the loss of their habitats and from the changing weather patterns that disrupt their lifeways, we are called to pay attention and make change.

Bioregionalism

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.”¹⁰

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,”¹¹ 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?”¹²

Prophetic Traditions, Truth-Telling, Communicating through an Ethical Lens

At their best, religious and spiritual leaders play a powerful role in helping people understand their moral obligations and to live in a good way. The ability to communicate connections between deep principles and practical actions is important to eco-justice. As we articulate and offer moral reasoning, framing questions, and guiding principles within our communities and to the public—via sermons, dharma talks, convening small groups for reflection, storytelling, and writing—we can apply the wisdom and ethos of our specific traditions to raise consciousness about these issues within our communities and in society at large.

We can help channel this consciousness into meaningful collective action. Faith groups are participating in organizing and advocacy work on local, national, and global levels such as campaigns to support the development of alternative energy sources, financially divest from polluting industries, pass moratoriums on new data centers, ban single use plastics, eliminate the use of certain toxic chemicals on our lands and waterways, and countless others.

Pastoral Care, Spiritual Support, Ritual, Ceremony, & Accompaniment in Community

Physical and emotional health are connected to the health of the environment. Western science continues to corroborate what many have always known intuitively—that time spent in healthy ecologies strengthens our overall sense of wellbeing, decreasing anxiety and depression together with a wide range of other emotional and physiological effects. Studies also show that feelings of “nature connectedness” play a substantial role in a person’s “pro-environmental behavior.”¹³

Lakota theologian Vine Deloria said: “The sacredness of land is first and foremost an emotional experience.”¹⁴ If we are seeking a culture of ecological balance we must strengthen our emotional experiences with the land. In our training we will address some of the different roles that faith and spiritual communities can play to tend to the spiritual and emotional relationship that exists between people and place - including pastoral and spiritual support, ceremony, and ritual.

Climate and ecological related anxiety, grief, and trauma are also on the rise and religious and spiritual leaders are being called upon to provide pastoral and spiritual support in this context. These maladies 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,” said eco-activist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy.¹⁵

Many find that the most powerful ways to work with climate anxiety include channeling the energy into collective organizing for eco-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.

Practical Engagement

Some religious and spiritual communities are already making tangible, practical changes within their buildings, institutions, and lands. They are installing heat pumps and solar panels, planting gardens and farms, engaging in land justice efforts, reducing waste, and much more. They are first responders in disaster relief and can make plans to offer shelter to the most vulnerable in the extreme weather events that are likely to come.

Small but powerful efforts to re-localize our economies are reducing energy consumption and waste as well as building community resilience and connection. For most of our human history, hands-on participation in the skills and rituals of daily living put us in active and attentive communication with the land. Growing and gathering food, accessing and caring for water, crafting clothes and household necessities, and creating art and beauty, required a level of land-based knowledge and care that, with outsourcing and globalization, is increasingly lost to us. Our gathering will explore efforts to re-localize and recover these skills and the implications on our spiritual wellbeing and ecological consciousness.

Music and the Arts

Throughout the training we hope to honor the important place of music and the arts in our communities and in this work. In many cultures throughout our history, little separated the realms of spirituality, art and creative expression, and tending our relationships to the land—all were intertwined in daily life. Choirs, song circles, chanting, dance, movement, asanas, poetry, stained glass and mandalas—artistic creative expression has always been a way to express our relationship to the divine, articulate our cosmological worldviews, and practice our ethical disciplines. These ways of creating beauty infuse life into our religious and spiritual communities and energy into our work for justice and ecological health.

Learning In and From the Spirit of Place to Cultivate our Belonging to the Earth

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.

On average, Americans now spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ In 2024 nearly half of all teenagers reported being online “almost constantly.”¹⁸ 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 continue to unfold—with profound and nuanced implications for our psyches, our collective spiritual and cultural worldviews, our communities, and the world at large.

But there is another way.

Many of us in Western industrial cultures are being called back to understanding the land as our teacher through Indigenous teachings and wisdom from other traditional Earth-based cultures, 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.

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. Many have found this to be a good way to build community as well. Rather than basing our culture on the commodification of basic life needs (alongside the marketing of superfluous or harmful things that counter them), we can help people go back to basics and beauty.

Western science is slowly beginning to acknowledge the benefits of this approach. 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.¹⁹

Some faith communities around the country, such as those in the Wild Church Network, are bringing services outside, conceiving of communion with nature as a form of spiritual practice.²⁰ Buddhist communities, such as those in Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village tradition²¹ or an increasing number of Ecodharma centers²² 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.

We are honored that we will be joined by a phenomenal group of people, whom all of us can learn from. We ask forgiveness in advance for any aspect we left out and hope that this occasion will lead to many more conversations, small and large. Finally, we are grateful to the land and waters where we gather and look forward to being together with the whole community of life. As Indigenous educator and author Gregory Cajete put it, “the entire tree of knowledge [is] in the soil of direct physical and perceptual experience of the earth. In other words, to know yourself you must first know the earth.”²³

¹ Leath Tonino–April “Two Ways of Knowing: Robin Wall Kimmerer on Scientific and Native American Views of the Natural World,” *The Sun* (April 2016), <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/22248-two-ways-of-knowing>.

² Ibid.

³ Somini Sengupta, “Why Rich People in America Have a Huge Carbon Footprint,” *The New York Times* (February 28, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/climate/climate-change-carbon-footprint-america.html>.

⁴ “Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities in the Distribution of Environmental Hazards: Assessing the Evidence Twenty Years after *Toxic Wastes and Race*,” *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987–2007*, accessed June 8, 2025, https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/toxic-wastes-and-race-at-twenty-1987-2007_Part5.pdf.

⁵ Leandro Vigna, Johannes Friedrich and Thomas Damassa, “The History of Carbon Dioxide Emissions,” World Resources Institute (June 3, 2024), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.wri.org/insights/history-carbon-dioxide-emissions>; Sengupta, “Why Rich People in America Have a Huge Carbon Footprint.”

⁶ “Which Countries are Most Affected by Climate Change?,” Oxfam, accessed June 8, 2025, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/issues/climate-action/which-countries-are-most-affected-by-climate-change/>.

⁷ “17 Principles of Environmental Justice,” First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24–27, 1991, <https://ejnet.org/files/ej/principles.pdf>.

⁸ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Thomas Berry and the Rights of Nature: Evoking the Great Work,” *Kosmos: Journal for Transformation* 19, 4 (n.d.), https://kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/thomas-berry-and-the-rights-of-nature/, accessed on June 7, 2026.

⁹ Green Amendments for the Generations, <https://forthe generations.org/>.

¹⁰ Quoted in “Bioregionalism is a vision of a future that works for people and for the Earth,” Cascadia Department of Bioregion (n.d.), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://cascadiabioregion.org/what-is-bioregionalism>.

¹¹ Rosie Semlyen, “Bioregionalism: A Return to Source,” Center for Earth Ethics (May 30, 2025). <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/bioregionalism-a-return-to-source/>.

¹² Richard Evanoff, “Bioregionalism Comes to Japan: An Interview with Peter Berg,” *Japan Environment Monitor* 97, 4 (June 1998), <http://www.sustainablecity.org/intervws/berg.htm>.

¹³ Leanne Martin, et al., “Nature Contact, Nature Connectedness and Associations with Health, Wellbeing and Pro-Environmental Behaviours,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 68 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2020.101389>.

¹⁴ Vine Deloria Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁵ J. Macy and J. Confino, “Active Hope: The Wisdom of Joanna Macy (Episode #25),” Plum Village (March 24, 2022), <https://plumvillage.org/podcast/active-hope-the-wisdom-of-joanna-macy-episode-25/#hypertranscript=NaN,Na>.

¹⁶ “Improving Your Indoor Environment,” United States Environmental Protection Agency (Updated on April 9, 2025), <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/improving-your-indoor-environment>.

¹⁷ Lindsey Leake, “17 years of your adult life may be spent online. These expert tips may help curb your screen time,” *Fortune Well* (March 6, 2024). <https://fortune.com/well/article/screen-time-overlifespan/>.

¹⁸ Michelle Faverio and Olivia Sidoti, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024,” Pew Research Center (December 12, 2024). <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-mediaand-technology-2024/>.

¹⁹ “The Science of Awe,” Greater Good Science Center (September 2018), accessed June 5, 2025, https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Awe_FINAL.pdf; Tiffany Field and Tory Field, “Ecotherapy Research: A Narrative Review,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology and Neurology* 2(4) (November 2024), 1–12, <https://oaskpublishers.com/assets/article-pdf/ecotherapy-research-a-narrative-review.pdf>.

²⁰ <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com/>.

²¹ <https://plumvillage.org/#filter=.region-na>.

²² <https://rmerc.org/what-is-ecodharma/>.

²³ Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 23–25.