

UNEP IN BRIEF

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created in 1972 as the environmental conscience of the UN system, to create an awareness in other agencies of the environmental impact of their activities. Since then, UNEP has leveraged a small budget into a program of major significance and lasting influence. It assesses the state of the world's environment, helps formulate international environmental law, strengthens the environmental management capacity of developing countries, and raises environmental concerns as social and economic policies and programs are considered.

UNEP advocates environmentally sound "sustainable development," a concept inspiring Agenda 21, the action plan adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development—the Earth Summit—in Rio de Janeiro.

UNEP helps solve problems that cannot be handled by nations acting alone, by providing a forum that allows countries to come to the table for negotiations, to build consensus and forge international agreements. UNEP also promotes the participation of faith traditions, non-governmental organizations, business, the scientific and academic communities, women, youth and others to achieve environmentally sustainable development.

The organization is headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, with six regional offices: Washington, DC, for North America, Geneva/Europe, Nairobi/Africa, Bangkok/Asia and the Pacific, Mexico City/Latin America and the Caribbean, and Bahrain/West Asia. It also has a New York Office to liaise with UN agencies. UNEP is headed by an Under Secretary-General, and its Governing Council has a rotating membership of 58 countries.

In 1986, the New York Office initiated the Environmental Sabbath (now the celebration of Earth in faith) as a time for people of faith to renew their relationship with the forces of creation. By combining a knowledge of the earth sciences with those of spiritual values, the goal is to transform our fundamental relationship with Earth from one of destruction to one of redemption and rejuvenation.

UNEP IN ACTION

- 1973** Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
- 1975** Mediterranean Action Plan (1st of 13 regional plans); International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals; Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS)
- 1979** Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals
- 1985** Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer
- 1987** Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer; Global 500 Roll of Honour
- 1988** UNEP-WMO Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
- 1989** Basel Convention on the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes
- 1991** UNEP-UN Development Programme-World Bank Global Environment Facility
- 1992** UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit); UN Convention on Biological Diversity; UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
- 1993** UNEP International Environmental Technology Centre
- 1994** UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought
- 1995** Global Program to Protect the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities
- 1996-2000** Negotiations toward treaties on trade in chemicals and persistent organic pollutants
- 2000** Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

From an address by Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme, to the World Council of Churches, 31 October 1999



When God said:

"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth..."

- ✧ did God intend that we would multiply at the rate of nearly 80 million additional people a year, and be rapidly approaching a global population of ten billion in the next century...
- ✧ that every day we would push an estimated 150 species of plant, animal and other living things that moveth upon the earth into extinction....

Was it God's plan that under human dominion, the global climate would be altered, with consequences ranging from more severe drought and more torrential rainfall not merely anticipated but being experienced today...

- ✧ that we would put chemicals into the air, water and soil that would return to poison us and dramatically reduce our ability to reproduce...
- ✧ that we would produce chemicals that destroy the ozone layer, exposing ourselves and all life forms to harmful solar radiation...causing higher incidents of skin cancer and suppressing our immune systems...
- ✧ that we would mow down an estimated 11.4 million acres of tropical forests each year...
- ✧ that we would allow over a billion people to live in conditions of extreme poverty, and allow 35,000 children to die each day of entirely preventable causes.

Surely this is not what God intended. The Hebrew word translated as "dominion" meant having responsibility for the well-being of the creation, not the right to destroy it. Man's dominion cannot be understood as license to abuse, spoil, squander or destroy what God has made to manifest His glory....

By acknowledging our rightful place within nature, we are accepting our responsibilities for its well-being, just as we take responsibility for the well-being of members of our families and friends. It's a matter of drawing a larger circle, not around your house, or your city or even your country, but around all life on Earth....

Gandhi said it best — we must *be* the change we wish to see in the world.

Members of the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment

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United Nations Environment Programme

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT · PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

Dear Friend,

As we enter a new century, characterized not only by sweeping and fundamental changes and immense new opportunities but also by greatly increased risks, the need to foster a new spirit of international cooperation has never been greater. As trade, economic and physical barriers among countries have progressively fallen and as wealth has increased in some countries, poverty and misery continue to be the lot of a large and growing segment of humanity.

It is in this context that we increasingly witness new challenges to the security and sustainability of the planet. At the same time, we also are witnessing an era where the fundamental lessons for humanity contained in the religious and faith traditions of the world are increasingly coming to the fore and guiding and motivating our actions to meet those challenges.

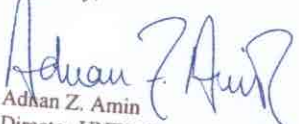
One of those challenges, environmental sustainability, is based on the realization that we can no longer blindly trust in the regenerative capacity of ecosystems. The need to meet social demands, address demographic pressures and poverty in developing countries, counterpoised against the excessive and often wasteful consumption habit in the developed countries, continues to provide the rationale for much of the work of the United Nations.

UNEP's "Global Environment Outlook 2000" confirms in its findings that the environmental crisis facing humanity in the new millennium is a world threatened, either because people have too much, or too little. The continued poverty of the majority of the planet's inhabitants and excessive consumption by the minority are the two major causes of environmental degradation. "GEO 2000" concludes that the present course is unsustainable and postponing action is no longer an option. However, no meaningful result can be envisaged without both a reflection on the ethical implications of our plans of action and a moral urgency for their implementation.

"**Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action**" is the result of a unique effort to continue the dialogue between the scientific and faith communities from which, we hope, will emerge a greater commitment to taking responsible actions for the protection of our environment for our common good. We, at UNEP, view the convergence of spiritual values and their respect for the environment as an inspiration for environmental actions today so that our succeeding generations may all be beneficiaries of a healthy planet and a development that is sustainable.

I would like to invite you to join us, through this publication, in exploring the lessons that the various faith traditions provide through the profound respect they teach for our planet. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to John Kirk, Director of the New Jersey School of Conservation, and to my predecessor, Noel J. Brown. Through their insight and perseverance, and with the commitment of the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, they launched one of UNEP's successful initiatives which, "by combining a knowledge of the earth sciences with the forces of spiritual values aims at transforming our fundamental relationship with the earth from one of destruction to one of redemption."

Sincerely,


Adnan Z. Amin
Director UNEP/New York Office

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Dear Friend,

This publication from the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment is the result of nearly 14 years of work with the United Nations and members of many faith communities. It began in the fall of 1986 when a few of us met at UN headquarters in New York with the leaders of several faith communities. With guidance and support from the United Nations Environment Programme, we began developing a project that would inform North American congregations about the serious environmental problems facing life on Earth, so we could work to protect this magnificent work of creation.

In June of 1987, our first Environmental Sabbath kit went to congregations across the United States and Canada. The goal was to create a sabbatical for our beleaguered planet — an Earth Rest Day to be celebrated annually by faith communities, at any time but especially on the weekend nearest the UN World Environment Day, June 5th. From that early effort, the program expanded to faith communities worldwide. Since our very humble beginning in 1986, we have learned that more than 130,000 religion and ecology projects have taken root worldwide. Today, the Interfaith Partnership's outreach is global and includes religions that do not celebrate a sabbath, although all have a powerful environmental ethic.

Today, we dedicate this publication and our efforts to a celebration of Earth in faith, to be held at any time throughout the year, but with the same purpose: to increase the ecological awareness of your congregation so that together we can act to save our sacred Earth.

All of us participating in this project welcome your good faith efforts to help protect all life on Earth. If we may be of any assistance, please feel free to contact us through UNEP in New York.

With gratitude,



John J. Kirk
Co-founder and Co-chair
Interfaith Partnership for the Environment

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INTERRELATED ELEMENTS OF AN EARTH AGENDA

WATER

Protect fresh water sources.
Protect oceans, coral reefs,
coastal areas and small islands.

LAND

Conserve biological diversity.
Combat deforestation and desertification.
Protect land resources from nitrogen overload.

HEALTH

Protect human health and the quality of life,
especially the living and working
environments of the poor, from pollution
and environmental degradation.

AIR*

Protect the atmosphere by combatting
climate change and transboundary air pollution.


INDUSTRY

Manage biotechnology in an ecologically safe way.
Manage hazardous wastes and toxic chemicals
in an environmentally sound manner.

WELL-BEING

Examine and change production
and unsustainable consumption patterns.
Analyze the effects of globalization
on the environment, and take
appropriate protective measures.

*When UNEP's first Earth and Faith book, *Only One Earth*, was published in 1991, atmospheric ozone was on this agenda. Today, the effort to combat ozone depletion is a success story! By early 2000, 172 countries had ratified the UNEP-brokered Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. Without it, levels of those substances would have been five times higher by 2050 than they are today. The purpose of the 1987 Protocol is to phase out production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances to protect human health and the environment. The level of these substances peaked in the late-1990s and is now starting to decline, but the incidence of skin cancer may not begin to fall until about 2060 due to the time lag involved while these long-lasting substances dissipate in the stratosphere.



We are aware that the earth was born and is borne by a delicate dynamic of forces which converged to become the integrity of our planet. We are enchanted by the splendor of its life emergence, of which we are but a part.

Today, humankind is increasingly aware of the expanding universe and its myriad transformations. We are now, as never before, aware of the emerging sequence revealing the origin and destiny of an incomparable universe.

We have but recently become witnesses to the unfolding of cosmic events that could not have been expected or presumed. We experience the elements of matter as the core of our existence.

Yet at the very time we are awestruck by this wondrous disclosure, we are stunned by the cumulative significance of human insensitivity to the natural world. We are informed, as never before, that the earth is subject to possibly irreparable damage to the primordial pattern of life-sustaining processes.

The spiritual challenge of the ecological crisis draws us back to our religious traditions, to reflect on and celebrate the natural world in its most profound sense of mystery as a manifestation and experience of the sacred. We humans find not only our place but also our presence to the sacred in this phenomenal emergence.

*The birth of twin star clusters as seen by the Hubble Space Telescope in a neighboring galaxy in the early universe 166,000 light-years away.
From NASA, October 1994*