

## What does Hinduism teach us about ecology?



### **Life is sacred**

All living beings are sacred because they are parts of God, and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Hinduism is full of stories that treat animals as divine, such as how Krishna used to herd cows, or how the monkey Hanuman was a faithful servant of the Rama. Most Hindus are vegetarian because of this belief in the sanctity of life. Even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls, and should be honoured and cared for.

### **Simple living**

The virtue of a simple life has always been prized in Hindu society. Teachers, or brahmanas, are advised to live on the charity of others and not accumulate too much wealth. The most highly respected person in Hindu society is the sadhu, or sage who lives outside normal society, in forests or caves, or travels on foot from one town to another. Sadhus take pride in living simply and consuming as little as possible.

### **Inner peace**

Hinduism stresses that true happiness comes from within not from outer possessions. This

means that the search for material possessions, and the consumption of materials and energy it brings, should not be allowed to dominate life. Life's main purpose is to discover the spiritual nature and the peace and fulfilment it brings. The efforts to exploit the things of this world is considered by Hindu teachers to be a distraction from this central purpose of life.

### How do Hindus care for the environment?



Hindus revere sacred rivers, mountains, forests and animals, and love to be close to nature. For example, many Hindu villages have a sacred lake, and around it a grove of trees to catch rainfall and protect the banks from erosion. The lake and its grove store rainfall to irrigate surrounding fields and supply village wells with drinking water. These lakes and groves are places of tranquillity and sanctuaries for wildlife, but in recent times the neglect of these simple techniques for gathering and protecting clean water has led to serious water shortages and advancing desertification in many parts of India. This is a common story in India: traditional Hindu practices of caring for nature are being forgotten and as a result human survival is becoming more difficult.

### What do Hindus believe about genetic modification?

One of the world's best-known campaigners against genetic modification is Vandana Shiva, an Indian scientist motivated by her native Hindu beliefs to champion the rights of rural women and farmers. She fought against the genetically modified 'terminator' seeds: seeds that produce only one crop and force farmers to buy new seeds each year from the suppliers. And she campaigns to stop the patenting of the sacred Neem tree, which Hindu stories say came from a drop of divine nectar carried to earth. Neem provides a natural and harmless alternative to pesticides, but global corporations have tried to patent it for their own use. She has written many books, and her [Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology](#) is a useful source of information.

### Long term plan

In November 2009 Hindus launched their [Nine Year Plan](#) to protect the living planet. Amongst more than 30 faith plans they celebrated the launch at Windsor Castle in the presence of HRH The Prince Philip, founder of ARC, and UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki-moon who, during his speech, reminded the faith representatives that "You can, and do, inspire people to change".

### The Bhumi Project and Nine Year Plan

Inspired by ARC and facilitated by the [Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies](#) (OCHS), the Bhumi project is an initiative aimed at educating, inspiring, informing, and connecting Hindus interested in service to Mother Earth ("Bhumi devi" in Sanskrit). The project aims at long-term sustainable plans, and the first of these is their Nine-Year Plan.

The Plan is broken down into three main areas: Networking, Action and Education:

#### **Networking:**

Working to promote the work of individuals and communities that are presently engaged in environmental action, the Nine Year Plan also aims to bring those with similar aims and ideals together to learn from each other and teach others, so that more and more Hindu eco-action can happen. This section of the plan places emphasis on, for example:

\***Websites:** As the projects contained within the plan evolve and grow they will require their own websites. the aim of these websites will be to educate and inform. they will provide the facility for users to interact with one another and share their experiences and success stories.

\***Major conservation projects:** The Bhumi project aims to partner with major conservation projects which are already operating so that they can bring their good work to the attention of a broader audience, and provide examples of good practice and dharmic living.

\***Green pilgrimage:** Most Hindu pilgrimage sites are in India. As the Hindu diaspora and indian middle class have grown, such sites are seeing a growth in their number of pilgrims. To reduce the environmental impact of the pilgrimages, the Plan aims to develop a set of guidelines that will encourage Hindu devotees to see all aspects of pilgrimage as sacred. This includes the means of transport, accommodation, and use of resources at holy sites.

#### **Action:**

An essential element of the Nine Year Plan is a call to arms. Without encouraging action – thoughtful, informed, and enthusiastic – the best formed Plan will be more suited to an archive than an impetus for change. This section of the Plan, then, promotes the following actions amongst many others:

\***Hindu labeling scheme:** The Hindu community has purchasing power. The Bhumi project wants to develop a set of standards based on the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) that will assist the community in ethical buying in line with its ethos and values.

\***Cruelty-free milk:** The Bhumi project will work closely with the Lotus Trust, which wishes to pioneer the production of cruelty-free milk for the Hindu community where no animals are sent for slaughter.

\***Green festivals and gatherings:** From travel to the temple to the plates on which food is served – all can have a significant impact on the environment. A team will be formed to help each Hindu festival to incorporate a protective attitude towards the planet. Sustainable practices will include: using recycled paper for printing promotional materials; using bio-degradable plates, cups and cutlery for serving food; promoting greener ways of transport to the festival; and ensuring all energy is used efficiently.

There are also plans to throw the **Bhumi Festival** in Summer 2011, which promises to attract thousands upon thousands of young people from the Hindu community as well as other faith and secular groups. The plan is for the festival to be ecologically sound as possible, and as such a great testament to Hindu environmentalism. See the [Bhumi website](#) for updates on this event.

### **Education:**

Effective education is key to all aspects of the Plan and is aimed at effecting a generational change in the Hindu community. Educational aims include:

\***Training for priests;** Hindu priests are influential in the daily running of their temples and in the performance of ceremonies. Crucial to effecting a positive change in the environmental choices of the Hindu community therefore is the education and training of temple priests. Establishing ecological awareness and standards in temple worship will, over time, influence and change the practice of those who worship at home.

\***Online course:** Not all Hindus live near a temple, or are able to attend a place of worship or gathering on a regular basis. To reach these people, and others, a short course on Hindu approaches to the environment will be developed by the OCHS to be delivered online. The course will run over a four-week period, two–three times a year. It is hoped that by the end of nine years, over 25,000 people will have taken it.

\***Summer camps:** Many temples and organisations run summer camps for the youth of their communities. Such events are an ideal way to educate young people on environmental issues and teach best practice. The Bhumi project will produce resources which these summer camps can use.