

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Divine Intervention

China's Taoist masters are mobilizing for the sacred earth

For years, environmentalists have been watching China's rapid economic growth and industrialization with alarm. The country's understandable desire to bring the West's modern lifestyle to over 1 billion Chinese is expected to help push humanity's cumulative environmental impact far beyond the earth's capacity. While some Chinese people are enjoying new conveniences, others and the environment are suffering significant harm, even outside China's borders.

The specifics are staggering. Imagine what it's like to live in a country where two-thirds of household sewage and one-third of industrial wastewater are released untreated. Nearly 700 million Chinese people drink water contaminated with animal and human waste. Discharges pollute China's major rivers, poisoning farms along the banks, pushing fish into extinction, and rendering key fisheries unusable. Acid rain from coal-fired power plants falls on one-third of China's agricultural land, damaging crops and contaminating foods. Unfettered development, deforestation, and overgrazing are spreading the Gobi Desert by 1,900 square miles annually. Cancer and premature deaths from respiratory disease are increasing dramatically. China's air and water pollution are contaminating other countries too, even the United States, and its hunger for natural resources is devastating habitats around the globe.

This environmental damage is costing China an estimated 8 to 12 percent of its annual \$3.4 trillion GDP. The global economic downturn is expected to slow China's growth somewhat, from 11.9 percent in 2007 to 9 percent in 2008, but this level is still ecologically unsustainable. In 2005, a vice minister of China's State Environmental Protection Administration warned, "The [economic] miracle will end soon because

the environment can no longer keep pace."

Amazingly, even in this repressed country, Chinese citizens have been taking to the streets, with an estimated 450,000 environmental protests in 2007, some with up to tens of thousands of protesters. Most gatherings are suppressed by force.

China's government has taken some positive steps, including setting ambitious environmental targets and cleaning up Beijing for the 2008 Olympics. However, government programs often fail because of corruption and competition from the country's economic aspirations. A poll found that only 18 percent of Chinese companies "believed that they could thrive economically while doing the right thing environmentally."

That's why I was intrigued to hear of a very different type of action being taken to shift China's ways. Just recently, Taoist masters gathered from all across China to agree on their own seven-year environmental action plan. Can they really have an impact? In a recent *UN Dispatch* article, Olav Kjørven of the United Nations Development Program acknowledges that the challenge is significant. Still, he says, traditional "Taoist values and beliefs continue to hold enormous sway in Chinese society" and are being welcomed back into policy-level discourse. Government officials actively attended this event, asking for Taoists' help in building a more environmentally harmonious and sustainable country.

Taoism brings a key asset, says Kjørven: its 5,000-year tradition of emphasizing alignment with nature and "environmental stewardship as a sacred duty." Most importantly, he says, "Taoists are walking the walk," installing solar panels on their thousands of temples, and "providing

comprehensive guidance on all aspects of environmental and climate stewardship." Their perspective is long-term: "to change the course for generations to come."

In this work, Chinese Taoists are not alone. Numerous world religions are developing seven-year environmental plans, with the assistance of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), founded by Britain's Prince Philip, husband of Queen Elizabeth II. Back in the 1980s, Philip was wondering how to engage more of the world's population in environmental action when it occurred to him that religious leaders could reach many people, encourage them to care for the natural world created by their particular deities, and speak in a way aligned with their unique traditions. Thus, says its website, ARC was created "to link the secular worlds of conservation and ecology with the faith worlds of the major religions."

In November 2009, a few weeks before the world's crucial Copenhagen climate meeting, ARC's 11 member faiths will officially present their plans and commitments. "This is no small contribution," Kjørven says. "These 11 faiths represent in some way or another roughly 80 to 85 percent of humanity. Perhaps that's enough to bring us to a global, political tipping point. In the end, it may just be what is needed to convince even the most stubborn and reluctant of policy makers that the time to secure humanity's future is now."

May it be so.

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