**A Brief History of Baha’i involvement in Environmental Issues**

A keynote address by Peter Adriance

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*(NOTE: In researching this talk, I created a* [*Timeline Chart which is available on line*](http://iefworld.org/node/540) *and has hot links to almost everything that happened… news releases, photos, statements issued, and more. It is intended to serve as a supplement to this talk.)*

[COVER SLIDE]

*Thanks and Good morning friends. It is truly an honor to be here in this marvelous space which I read about some years back when it was first built. I remember seeing the video of the crane lifting the dome into place and thinking, what a marvel, both from an ecological and aesthetic standpoint! I never imagined I would be here one day. It is a befitting venue for our conference. I wish to express many thanks to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and to the organizing committee for all the support to make this event possible.)*

As mentioned, I’ve been asked to share with you some of the history of Baha’i engagement in the environment. Considering the scope of this topic and our time constraints I thought it might help to look at it through the METAPHOR OF A TREE. Using metaphors from nature is something that Baha’u’llah did often in His Writings. (In a familiar passage, He counseled us, “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship.” - Baha'u'llah, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 14). So let’s proceed.

In this case, our tree will represent Baha'i environmental activities in THREE DISTINCT PERIODS OF TIME. The early period (ROOTS of the tree) would be from the time of Baha’u’llah (late 1800s) to about 1970; the middle period (TRUNK AND LOWER BRANCHES) would be from about 1970 to the present; and the contemporary period (the tree’s UPPER CANOPY), begins about 2010 and goes forward. Those time periods are disproportionate in terms of their duration, but in terms of the nature of actions taken, I think you will see that they are quite distinct.

The SOIL in which the tree has been growing represents the Teachings of our Faith -- the guiding principles or spiritual truths, which animate our actions and help us to understand our relationship with nature and our role in fostering sustainable development. It is from the Teachings that all Baha'i-inspired action flows.

What distinguishes each of these periods -- or parts of the tree -- is the nature of Baha’i involvement during those times. The ROOTS include the actions of the Central Figures of the faith (Baha’u’llah, Abdu’l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi) and I would be remiss not to include an important early conservationist and Baha’i, Richard St. Barbe Baker, known as the “Man of the Trees.” The TRUNK and lower branches represent the activities of the institutions of the Faith, mostly at the international level, but sometimes at the national and local level as well. The UPPER CANOPY OF THE TREE represents the current time, going forward. It is characterized by increasing involvement at every level – those of the institutions, the community and the individual -- and engagement with society-at-large on issues of importance, both in terms of participating in discourses on pressing issues and in engaging in social action.

FIRST: THE SOIL

Our engagement in the environment, of necessity, has drawn upon the fertile soil of the Faith’s Teachings. There are THREE BAHA’I PRINCIPLES OF “PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE” that were highlighted in a 1995 document called “Conservation and Sustainable Development in the Baha'i Faith.”[[1]](#footnote-2) (More on that later...) They are as follows:

* NATURE REFLECTS THE QUALITIES AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD and should, therefore, be greatly respected and cherished;
* ALL THINGS ARE INTERCONNECTED and flourish according to the law of reciprocity; and
* THE ONENESS OF HUMANITY is the fundamental spiritual and social truth shaping our age.

There are a number of passages from the Writings that clarify these principles, but I won’t take time now to review them. Suffice it to say, these three principles really are foundational. They are the nutrients in the soil[[2]](#footnote-3) upon which our tree of environmental stewardship and justice has been growing – they are core beliefs that have animated much of our engagement in the environment since the beginning.

FROM THE SOIL GROWS THE TREE. The ROOTS of our involvement in environmental issues run deep and stretch over a fairly extensive time period – from the time of Bahá'u'lláh (late 1800s) to around the time of the formation of the Universal House of Justice (1963) and even a little later. During the formative stages of the Faith, the lives of each of the Central Figures (Baha’u’llah, Abdu’l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi) all contained examples of both appreciation for nature and the ways in which human society depends upon and draws sustenance from it. As mentioned I will include Richard St. Barbe Baker in this section too because of his unique role as an environmental pioneer and his close relationship with the Faith.

ONE STORY I’D LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU is that of Baha’u’llah and the restoration of an AQUEDUCT to supply water to Acre. Baha’u’llah in his years as a prisoner in Acre gained the respect of many, and he was often visited by important figures seeking counsel. He lived in the house of Abbud, who was a prominent merchant and respected Christian. When He was visited by Abbud once, Abbud was moved to ask Baha’u’llah if there was anything that he could do to be of service to Him. Baha’u’llah prophesized that the aqueduct which at one time had brought water to the city but had fallen into disrepair would someday be repaired. Would Abbud wish to be the one to do it, he enquired. (I think there is something here to point out – and that is that Baha’u’llah considered repairing a municipal water system -- thus serving the needs of the whole city -- as a way of serving Him.) It turned out that Abbud didn’t follow through with Baha’u’llah’s suggestion, but two subsequent visitors – successive mayors of the city, approached him in a similar manner, and did the work to accomplish the job – one to start it, and the other to finish it. When water -- such a precious environmental resource -- began to flow once again into Acre, the municipality celebrated by firing off 100 cannon shots. (This was obviously a time when concern over air pollution wasn’t high on the list!)

ANOTHER STORY is that of the Ridvan Garden. For many years, as you know, Baha’u’llah was deprived of access to greenery. He longed to spend time in nature, but it was not possible. But after some years, he gained such trust and respect from the authorities that he was extended freedom to go out of the city. At that time, Abdu’l-Baha took it upon himself to rent a small island between two streams, and to create for his father a place where he could go and rest and enjoy some of the beauty of which He had been long-deprived. Knowing of Baha’u’llah’s love of greenery, pilgrims coming from around the Ottoman Empire and beyond also contributed to Abdul’-Baha’s project by bringing plants with them on their long journey, sometimes forgoing water themselves to keep the plants alive.

As you may be aware the Ridvan Garden has recently been restored and can be visited when you go on pilgrimage to the holy land. What is unique about this holy place is that it is a garden -- most holy places are surrounded by gardens, but here, the garden is the holy place.

Another link with an environmental and social issue is that of Abdu’l-Baha’s efforts to relieve famine toward the end of World War I. Before the war, foreseeing the coming conflict, He worked with the people in three villages to grow substantial amounts of corn and wheat, which were then stored for a time of need. After his return from his historic visit to the West in 1912, foreseeing the escalating conflict, He suspended the arrival of all pilgrims to the Baha'i Holy shrines and sent many of His followers back to their families. In the aftermath of the great war of 1914-1918, a great famine broke out in the land. Abdul-Baha was able at this time to open up the stored wheat and grain to the population and save them from great catastrophe. Because of this act of service to the community, He received the title of Knight of the British Empire (KBE) – a title He virtually never used.

Another story with an essential environmental component relates to Shoghi Effendi, who became Guardian of the Faith at the very young age of 25. A number of times during his life, particularly in the years immediately following the ascension of Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi retired to the mountains of Switzerland to regain his health, energy and self-confidence. Ruhiyyih Khanum writes about this in The Priceless Pearl. She says he often rose long before sunrise, would take a train to the foot of some mountain or pass and begin his excursion, walking often ten to sixteen hours in a day. His longest walk was forty two kilometers over two passes. He also climbed some of the higher mountains roped to a guide. These expeditions lasted practically up to the time of his marriage.

I’m reminded from this story of the passage by Baha’u’llah where He refers to various elements of nature and how He sees in them the attributes of God. He says, “whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies… and at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.” Not only is nature a reflection of the Divine, but being in nature can be a tonic to the soul as well as the body, as Shoghi Effendi, Abdu’l-Baha and Bahá'u'lláh knew so well.

A letter written on Shoghi Effendi’s behalf in 1933 contains these words:

"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."

Of course, we also think of Shoghi Effendi in relation to the gardens which he lovingly and energetically laid out around the Holy Shrines at Bahji and on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. They blend natural beauty with a precision and sense of care and order that uplifts the soul and inspires reverence befitting these holy places. He set a standard of excellence in these endeavors which is also reflected in the beautiful gardens and terraces later constructed around the Shrine of the Bab. The blending of the natural and more formal in this setting is truly exquisite.

Richard St. Barbe Baker

Richard St. Barbe Baker was truly an environmental pioneer, way ahead of his time. He became a Baha’i in 1924. Close to that time, he formed an organization called Men of the Trees. Working as a forester in Kenya and he saw the devastation to agricultural lands and forests from the practices that were being used at the time, and he devised methods for integrating farming and the raising of trees.

He didn’t have much in the way of resources in his official job working for the British government, so he did something that no one had done previously: he enlisted the help of the indigenous population. His approach could be called ‘social forestry.’ He went about this in a very respectful way that honored native traditions: picking up on a common cultural practice, he developed a dance that went along with the planting of trees.

Men of the Trees has grown and spread, and it is responsible for the planting of literally billions of trees on the planet. Australia has its own branch of Men of the Trees. It’s also known now in some places as the International Tree Foundation. Wikipedia attributes trillions of trees being planted as a result of this organization.

St. Barbe, as he was often called, felt that the stately and majestic redwood trees in California, which had been growing for thousands of years, were the heritage of all humankind. In the ‘30s they were being cut down at a fairly rapid rate. There were plans to leave little clusters of them here and there as samples of what the redwoods had been like. But St. Barbe realized that the trees needed to grow in larger groves in order to produce the microclimate that would enable them to survive and thrive. He initiated a public awareness campaign in the United States to save the redwoods. This resulted in a 12,000 acre plot of the trees being set aside and preserved in perpetuity. Extending that work in the ‘60s, he helped to divert plans for a highway that was slated to run right through another grove. At the prompting of the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the U.S. helped to advocate for that successful initiative.

In 1929, Shoghi Effendi became the first lifetime member of Men of the Trees. For years after that, he contributed opening remarks which were read at the annual World Forestry Charter Gatherings, organized by St. Barbe to assess the state of the world’s forests and to which people came from all over the world.

St. Barbe was also famous for his efforts to reclaim the Sahara Desert by the planting of trees. He undertook a 9000 Km expedition that assessed the state of the Sahara. It has been said that if his plans had been carried out, desertification in the world would not have spread to the extent that it has.

Let’s go back to our tree metaphor: You remember that the trunk of the tree represents the period from the early 70s to about 2010 and largely involves the institutions of our Faith. This parallels the great awakening that began to take place worldwide in the 70s, partially as a result of Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring, which brought to light the harmful and pervasive impacts of toxic chemicals and precipitated the first Earth Day in 1970. During that time it became clear that the human impact on the natural world had gone global. There was an obvious need for new levels of cooperation in caring for the planet. The world began to come together during that period to try to solve problems that may have started on the local level but had become global. We can see a great upsurge of Baha’i activity during that time.

I’m just going to summarize this period – as it is so extensive. I could talk about it for half a day or more. But I just want to give you some highlights and relate a few stories. (See also the Timeline Chart.)

* Since 1972, the Bahá'ís took part in every UN conference on sustainability themes, making diverse contributions – papers, workshops, seminars, preparatory events, arts initiatives and so forth (more on those below).
* Since 1972, there have been copious statements offering Bahá'í perspectives on a full range of sustainable development themes.
* In the mid ‘80s there were some major interfaith initiatives that took place. In 1986 there was the Assisi gathering, where five major religions came together to talk about their relationship with the environment. The year following that, the Bahá'ís were the sixth religion to join that effort. By the mid ‘90s, that organization became the Alliance on Religion and Conservation, an international organization that has helped to catalyze the participation of faith communities addressing some of the world’s most severe environmental problems.
* As I mentioned earlier, in 1989, the Office of the Environment at the Bahá'í International Community UN Office was established.
* That same year in its Ridvan Message, the Universal House of Justice encouraged the Bahá'í community to assist “in endeavors to conserve the environment” in ways that “blend with the rhythm of life in our community.”
* In 1990, the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice published, *Conservation of the Earth’s Resources* -- a wonderful compilation of Bahá'í Writings on the environment and our relationship with it. (This happened just as I was starting to work on environmental issues for the Bahá'ís of the U.S.)
* Throughout the decade of the 90s, Bahá'ís were involved in the Earth Charter Initiative, which set out to draft an ethical framework for living sustainably on Earth. (I was deeply personally involved in that myself, and I have some stories that I won’t have time for this morning, but I would gladly share with you later, offline.)
* One of the outcomes of the 1992 Earth Summit was the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which meets annually to assess progress toward sustainable development. Every year the Bahá'ís have organized programs there that bring forward ideas to address these issues.

Climate related initiatives…

* Baha’is have sponsored lots of workshops, seminars and so forth focusing on the challenge of climate change – mostly its ethical dimensions.
* In 2005, the Bahá'í International Community took the lead on that topic at the CSD. No organization previously had brought up the ethical dimensions of the issue. The Bahá'ís held a side event on the topic that was packed -- standing room only. Arthur Dahl was one of the speakers. Don Brown, a colleague of mine who heads up the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change, was also a speaker. (For more on this, see links to that story and to a video of Don Brown’s talk in the supplemental timeline chart which I am submitting as an annex to my talk).

Now, I just want to run through a few photos of some of these events:

* The ’92 Earth summit was the biggest thing the Bahá'ís had ever done at that point on the international level. It was huge. There were 140 Bahá'í volunteers that came out to support it in various ways, there were close to twenty Bahá'ís that were officially involved, either as representatives of the Bahá'í international community, or as members of their government delegations.
* Janek Palta McGilligan (center of upper left photo) was one of two Bahá'í recipients of a Global 500 award from UNEP for her work in educating about the environment, through the Barli Institute for Rural Women. (The other was Irma Allen of Swaziland.)
* Kevin Locke (upper right) was there. He is a Native American who has done a lot of work to revive the language and music of his people, and he performed in the well-attended “Evening in the Park” cultural and musical celebration series that the Bahá'ís organized nightly.
* The Bahá'ís dedicated an hourglass shaped Peace Monument in Rio that year. About 400 people attended the dedication where soils were brought from many countries and were poured inside. Chip Lindner, who organized the Global Forum where civil society met at the Summit, said, that the Summit wasn’t really about sustainable development, it was about the words across the bottom of the Peace monument: “The Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.” That sentiment was very much felt there.
* Over on the left is Venus Pezeshk from the Brazilian Bahá'í community and Jim Grant, the head of UNICEF, looking over the book, Tomorrow Belongs to the Children, which was published jointly by the Bahá'ís and UNICEF, offering children’s views on the state of the planet.

Interfaith initiatives –

* In 1995 The Alliance on Religion and Conservation was transformed from a less formal Network to the Alliance which aimed to trigger stronger commitments to environmental stewardship in each of the participating faith communities. The Bahá'ís were very much there. (The photo includes Ruhiyyih Khanum; Lawrence Arturo, Director of the Office of the Environment; and Arthur Dahl).
* Later on in 2008, before the Copenhagen meeting on climate (COP-15), members of the Alliance met and made commitments to generational change to address the climate issue, and the Bahá'í International Community was among those pledging action. In the U.S., that commitment has inspired a lot of subsequent activity at the national and local levels.

Some additional photos:

* The earth charter drafting process – that photo was at Rio+5 in 1997 when we participated in drafting Benchmark Draft I.
* The World Summit on Sustainable Development took place in 2002. There’s arthur again in one of the Bahá'í exhibits,
* And some of the Bahá'ís who supported our efforts there – a very collaborative environment.
* And here’s Suzi Tamas, representing the Bahá'ís of Canada speaking in a recent interfaith climate ethics meeting where the religions developed a statement on climate ethics.

When we speak of institutional involvement, of course we have to include organizational involvement. The International Environment Forum (IEF) is a Baha'i-inspired organization formed in 1997. It’s now in its 15th year. This is a good time to look back and reflect on its history. In the first meeting there were 20 members. Now there are close to 300 in more than 50 countries. Every year its members become more and more engaged in the discourses of society, both through meetings that we attend on behalf of IEF, and in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community. The IEF has become a tremendous resource, supplying help and expertise on environmental issues and values, to a range of stakeholders.

Finally, the UPPER CANOPY of the tree of Baha’i environmental involvement represents a new stage: engagement of not only the institutions, but much more widely, the community and individuals. The institutions of the Faith are now encouraging us to branch out, to engage with our wider communities.

This is a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the U.S. to the American Baha'i community, in early 2010, after the BIC had made that seven year commitment on climate change, which is really aimed at developing educational materials for junior youth and inspiring acts of service. In its letter, the National Spiritual Assembly encouraged the Bahá'í community to integrate environmental awareness and stewardship into its community life and core activities. It took note of the destabilization of the climate system and how urgent and important that was, and stated that it represented a moral challenge, not just a technical one. It encouraged us to study and reflect on the Bahá'í teachings on the environment and incorporate that greater awareness into our community life and core activities. And then it clarified how this effort related to the growth of our community: “Far from distracting from the processes of growth underway in our community, attention to environmental practices that respect the earth and foster the oneness of its inhabitants will serve to support and sustain these processes.“

Photos from environmental Stewards Champions of Justice – In recent years we’ve been working to raise the awareness of the Bahá'í community in the U.S. , by holding workshops at all of the permanent schools – Green Acre, Bosch, Louhelen. We’ve now had several of these over a couple of years. Most of them have focused on Jr. Youth. One focus is to try to combat [“nature deficit disorder”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_deficit_disorder) resulting from lack of exposure to the outdoors, which our children and youth are often suffering from now. We work on connecting not only with the Creative Word, but the Created World (the “Book of Creation”). We address social issues (e.g. consumption patterns, climate change, hunger, inequities) and let them experience a lot of what’s going on in the world at large. They conclude by making personal plans to take what they’ve learned home and put it into action. The photo on the right is of a young person writing a letter to herself from her “magic spot” in the woods. And after the weekend, these “magic spot” experiences where they’re out in the woods, contemplating nature and the Writings, reflecting on their experience and writing to themselves – this has been a very profound aspect of the program.

To conclude: I want to take us back to that Ridvan Message of 1989 and remind us of what the House of Justice said, “...assisting in endeavours to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community must assume more importance in Bahá'í activities.” There often seems to be a lag time between receiving guidance like this and putting it into action! I think we’re beginning to catch on.

At Ridvan 2010, the message talks about engaging in public discourse (as well as social action) and mentions climate change and the environment as areas in which we increasingly will engage.

We’ve gotten encouragement from the institutions, and I think it provides us with significant impetus. The latest messages offer new guidance. They call us to new levels of action and involvement in society. The core activities we’re involved in foster community building. They help to prepare us to engage more deeply in the discourses of society, and to get involved in different forms of social action. Through our devotional gatherings, study circles, junior youth programs and children’s classes we are building strengths that will help us contribute to the healing of the world. That is the direction in which we are heading. We’re encouraged to look at this time not only as a period of expansion in numbers – but expansion in the ways in which we are doing things and in how we are thinking about them. We’re called to a higher level of involvement in society. It is a time in our history that is both exciting and challenging. It should also be rewarding on many levels.

Thank you.

1. This paper was presented at a meeting that took place in Windsor Castle, London, in 1995 --the “Summit on the Alliance between Religions and Conservation.” And it was there that representatives of nine major faiths gathered to discuss their responsibilities toward the environment and to explore ways that faith communities could work to lessen the harmful impacts of humanity’s activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. On the importance of spiritual principles: "There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is imminent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of governments and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them." (UHJ, Promise of World Peace, 1985) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)