

State of the World 2013

IS
SUSTAINABILITY
Still Possible?



THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE

Building an Enduring Environmental Movement

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In the early 1980s—not long after monumental victories in improving air and water quality—some within the environmental movement questioned the true value of these successes. Environmentalist Peter Berg pointed out that “rescuing the environment has become like running a battlefield aid station in a war against a killing machine that operates just beyond reach, and that shifts its ground after each seeming defeat. No one can doubt the moral basis of environmentalism, but the essentially defensive terms of its endless struggle mitigate against ever stopping the slaughter.”¹

Decades later, the moral basis of environmentalism is still undoubted, though the design and execution of many environmental campaigns have received increased scrutiny. And the deeper critique has yet to be answered. Environmentalism, first and foremost, continues to be a game of defense—working to reduce overall carbon emissions, chemical releases, forest loss—rather than a battle to transform the dominant growth-centric economic and cultural paradigm into an ecocentric one that respects planetary boundaries. And today, more than ever, environmentalists are outmaneuvered by better funded, better organized, and better connected adversaries, which keeps victory well beyond reach.

The current focus of environmentalism leaves little hope of successfully defeating the ecologically destructive political, economic, and cultural forces that undermine the very foundations of life. It will require a dramatic reboot if the movement is going to reverse Earth’s rapid transformation and help create a truly sustainable future—or at least help humanity get through the ugly ecological transition that most likely lies ahead.

Are Today’s Environmental Organizations Succeeding?

There have been plenty of internal critiques of the environmental movement since it appeared on the scene in the 1960s—from deep ecology and bioregionalism in the 1970s to the recent reports *The Death of Environ-*

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mentalism and *Weathercocks and Signposts: The Environment Movement at a Crossroads*.²

In 2004, in *The Death of Environmentalism*, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus made two important criticisms of modern environmental advocacy: that it fails to provide any bold vision of a sustainable future and that it is essentially “just another special interest,” unable to capture “the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem.”³

In the 2008 WWF-UK report *Weathercocks and Signposts*, Tom Crompton noted that in environmentalists’ urgent efforts to change people’s behavior, they have often reinforced dominant consumeristic values rather than tapping more-sustainable values, like altruism. This, he noted, has proved to be a strategy that offers some short-term success but undermines itself in the long run, for example, as people who were encouraged to save money by buying energy-efficient lightbulbs then spend their savings on new consumer products.⁴

And recently the Smart CSOs Lab noted that environmental organizations are typically focused on a single issue—climate change, biodiversity, deforestation, toxic chemicals, conservation—and thus fail to think holistically about solutions, focusing on short-term fixes rather than addressing root causes.⁵

There is validity in all of these critiques. Many campaigns focus on treating environmental problems rather than addressing their roots, and they typically do so in ways that fail to build an alternative vision for a species not in a permanent state of conflict with the planet.

Worse still is that the movement is not even battling immediate threats all that well. Along with often being a marginalized special interest—failing to build strong-enough alliances to pass Earth-saving legislation—many conservation and environmental groups have also fallen prey to the same conflicts of interest observed in other philanthropy-dependent sectors. Just as more medical researchers have accepted funding from pharmaceutical companies, and breast cancer advocacy groups from companies that produce cancer-causing products, some environmental groups—seeking to have as large an impact as possible—are taking more funds from corporations with questionable environmental track records.⁶

As journalist and former Conservation International employee Christine MacDonald describes in *Green, Inc.*, accepting funding from corporations—which have a lot to spread around and are willing to do so to “greenwash” their image—has misdirected organizations from the true challenges facing them. Moreover, it has led some groups to soften their criticism of supportive companies and in some cases has even led to questionable endorsements of polluting companies or their products.⁷

This cozy relationship has also provided some of the most unsustainable corporations a way to mitigate the public relations challenges of being major polluters. MacDonald found that 29 of “The Toxic 100”—the worst corporate air polluters in the United States according to the Political Economy Research Institute—are major contributors to conservation organizations. Whether these and other corporations have just used environmental groups as greenwashing vehicles or have also influenced the agendas of the organizations that they donate to is harder to measure. But considering the size

of some donations and the presence of corporate representatives on many organizations’ boards, it is hard to imagine that these relationships have no influence at all. David Morine, a former vice president in charge of land acquisition at The Nature Conservancy, said after leaving the organization that his pioneering effort to bring in corporate funders “was the biggest mistake in my life,” as he told the *Washington Post*. “These corporate executives are carnivorous. You bring them in, and they just take over.”⁸

What is more, most environmental organizations, including

Worldwatch Institute, receive funding from affluent donors, foundations, and corporations that depend on a growing economy to keep their endowments robust enough to continue their philanthropy. Ironically, if environmental groups actually succeed in building a sustainable, equitable, steady-state economy, there is a good chance that their donors’ philanthropic giving would shrink as wealth is better distributed and as stock markets stop growing. And if environmentalists fail in their mission, there’s also a good chance the economy will contract: a 2012 report by DARA International projects that gross domestic product worldwide will shrink 3.2 percent a year by 2030 if climate change and air pollution are not dealt with. A shrinking economy is rarely a boon to philanthropy.⁹

Even if most environmental groups had secure forms of funding that did not lead to conflicts of interest, the broader critique remains. The movement is trying to stem the tide of global ecocide with strategies that fall far short of what is necessary to create a truly sustainable civilization—whether that is due to short-term thinking, overspecialization, lack of vision, or the realities



Toyota

The environmental group Audubon displays the new car it won from Toyota in a social media popularity contest.

of making political compromises, especially when at the table with much more powerful actors.

Thus it is time for the environmental movement to evolve. It needs to accelerate the shift to a sustainable society and to become more independent and resilient, even in the worst-case scenario of a rapid ecological transition. The only question is, How?

A Deeper Environmentalism

In 2007, a group of prominent environmentalists gathered in Aspen, Colorado, to discuss how to redesign the environmental movement to combat the linked environmental, social, and spiritual crises facing humanity. The group concluded that humanity needs a “new consciousness,” new stories, new values—including an “ethics of reverence for the Earth” and a sense of intergenerational responsibility. And that to spread these, the movement will need to redevelop its grassroots potential, diversify its sources of funding, and use a variety of innovative strategies like embedding environmental education into schools’ core curricula, doing a better job using media programming to spark environmental awareness, and establishing a Peace Corps–like effort that could help restore ecosystems and tackle global environmental challenges.¹⁰

The idea of deepening humanity’s environmental consciousness and redesigning the movement to help do this is certainly not new. In 1973 Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term *deep ecology*, criticizing the “shallow” anthropocentric approach to environmentalism and instead advocating an ecocentric ecological philosophy to guide individuals and the movement. One of his main conclusions was that we need a set of principles to guide our behavior and to reinforce our commitment to help our planet flourish. His hope was that each of us would make a personal “ecosophy” (ecological philosophy) stemming from these principles that would shape our broader values and lives—from what we buy and eat and how many children we have to how we spend our time. Naess, with deep ecology, was perhaps the first to propose making environmentalism a fully lived philosophy.¹¹

But deep ecology and its critique have remained marginal ideas in the broader movement, with environmentalists continuing to focus instead on short-term or shallow campaign goals. So it is not surprising, then, that environmental groups continue to engage their members in shallow ways—asking for donations, signatures on petitions, support of a specific political candidate, perhaps participation in a local protest. Yet within the movement, rare are the deeper opportunities to engage—community potlucks, for instance, or weekly meetings filled with stories of celebration or hope.

Defensive advocacy remains the environmental movement’s primary role. As theologian and environmentalist Martin Palmer notes, “Environ-

mentalists have stolen fear, guilt and sin from religion, but they have left behind celebration, hope and redemption.” The problem is that fear without hope, guilt without celebration, and sin without redemption is a model that fails to inspire or motivate.¹²

Environmentalists must create a more comprehensive philosophy—complete with an ethics, cosmology, even stories of redemption—that could deeply affect people and change the way they live. Vaclav Havel, the Czech writer and political leader, once asked, “What could change the direction of today’s civilization?” He answered that “we must develop a new understanding of the true purpose of our existence on this Earth. Only by making such a fundamental shift will we be able to create new models of behavior and a new set of values for the planet.”¹³

This, naturally, should be the starting point of any philosophy, ecological or otherwise. Why are we here? and What is our purpose? are questions as old as human beings. And while religions have offered one set of explanations, and science another, neither have proved up to the task of answering in a way that enables humanity to live within the bounds of Earth.

The first principle of deep ecology points out that “the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth has inherent value. The value of nonhuman life-forms is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.” This ecocentric view of the planet offers a possible answer. Humanity’s purpose may be as straightforward as helping the earth to flourish—and certainly not impeding its ability to do so.¹⁴

The ethics of an effective eco-philosophy must be grounded, completely and fully, in Earth’s ecological realities and should facilitate humanity’s Earth-nurturing purpose. As conservationist Aldo Leopold noted over 60 years ago, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” This simple rule could serve as a foundation for a broader ecological ethics.¹⁵

Granted, this will not be an easy ethical code to follow. As the fourth principle of deep ecology notes, “the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.” Decreases in both human population size and its impact (as much an outcome of how we consume as our total numbers) may raise some uncomfortable questions, such as, Can we have a sustainable civilization while fully respecting people’s freedom to reproduce or consume without limits? However, not wrestling with these limits may prove much more perilous. And perhaps over time, norms around optimal family size and consumption levels will evolve, facilitating the transition to cultures in balance with a flourishing Earth.¹⁶

In order for this philosophy to attract people, it will also need to answer broader philosophical questions like Where did we come from? (cosmology)

and Why do we suffer? (theodicy)—an essential component of any comprehensive philosophy, and one that will be especially necessary in getting through the difficult centuries to come.

Of course, other elements will have to emerge as well. Stories, exemplars, ways to cultivate fellowship among adherents, and ways to celebrate life's rites of passage—birth, coming of age, marriage, and death—and other cycles of life like the advent of a new year. Together, these elements could add up to a robust, holistic ecological philosophy that could inspire people across cultures to follow a new ecocentric way of life and encourage others to join them.

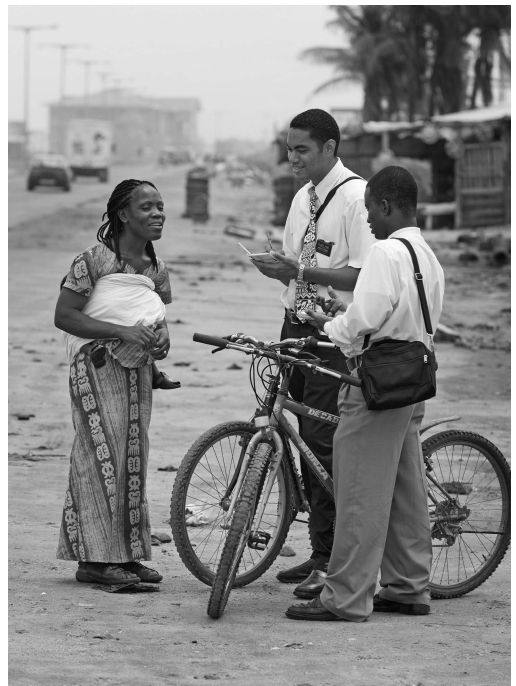
For that to happen, however, environmentalists must build the mechanisms to cultivate community among members and to spread this philosophy to new populations. In other words, for the environmental movement to succeed it will have to learn from something it often ignores or even keeps its distance from—religion, and specifically missionary religions, which have proved incredibly successful in orienting how people interpret the world for millennia, effectively navigating across radically different eras and geographies.

Missionary Movements and Their Potential

Let's start with a basic question. How have missionary religious philosophies spread so completely around the world? (Religions, while they are understandably more than this to adherents, are essentially orienting philosophies.) Yes, swords and guns were part of the success equation, as was the adoption of these philosophies by governments. But a larger part of these philosophies' success was a powerful, timeless vision, beautiful stories, inspiring exemplars, committed adherents, and the promise of immediate assistance—the offering of food, clothing, education, livelihoods, medical care, even a community.

The advent of Christian Socialism in the mid-nineteenth century offers a powerful and relevant case study on the spread of Christianity in a disrupted, rapidly industrializing, and urbanizing Europe and United States. Recognizing the corrosive effects of cities and urban poverty, many Christian reformers worked to spread the Gospel through the creation of social programs—including providing job trainings, food, safe shelters for people migrating to the cities, and so on.¹⁷

Both the Salvation Army and the YMCA were founded in the United



Two Mormon missionaries speaking to an African woman with a baby.

Kingdom in this era, spreading Christian values and the faith through the provision of social services. Today, both organizations continue to have a global reach, and combined they have several million volunteers reaching out to tens of millions of people in more than 110 countries. In 2011, the Salvation Army alone provided \$3 billion worth of basic social service assistance to nearly 30 million people.¹⁸

Box 27–1. The Shakers’ Relevance in a Post-Consumer Era

While often dismissed as a failed experiment—as their community no longer exists today—at their peak the Shakers were a powerful religious, economic, and social force, growing to 6,000 members in 1840 even while practicing celibacy. At the time, the group was a leading producer of herbal medicines. And its members were celebrated architects and craftspeople as well as renowned inventors: they invented the circular saw, clothespins, and ironing-free cloth. Believing that God dwelt in the quality of their craftsmanship, the Shakers strove for perfection in crafting their simple but beautiful products. And this success drew many new adherents to their faith.

But the Industrial Revolution and the mass-produced goods it led to were the Shakers’ undoing. As markets for their high-quality, higher-cost products collapsed in the mid-1800s, so did their economic niche and their total number of adherents. The Shakers offer an important lesson, however: strong community and a relevant economic niche can attract people and provide the foundation for broader influence, even when certain elements of the philosophy are hard to stomach.

As access to cheap energy sources wanes, and with it mass-produced goods and globalized trade, many aspects of this model could once again flourish, providing one possible way to spread an ecocentric philosophy.

Source: See endnote 20.

The Catholic Knights of Columbus—founded in Connecticut in 1882 and now boasting 1.8 million members worldwide—also used a powerful communitarian model, offering support for recent Catholic immigrants to the United States (who often worked dangerous jobs and were excluded from labor unions). The Knights provided life insurance to care for widows and orphans if members were killed. Today it underwrites more than \$80 billion in life insurance policies and continues to be active in charitable and political activities.¹⁹

Providing social services is not only a worthy goal in itself but also a means to build broader influence—growing the ranks of adherents and changing how people view the world and live their lives, and then using that influence to shape broader social, cultural, economic, and political norms. The Shakers, a Christian sect founded in England in 1771, offer a valuable lesson in how to grow influence and even in how to prepare for the coming economic and ecologic transition. (See Box 27–1.)²⁰

Another Christian offshoot, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), offers one more successful strategy to spread a philosophy—going door to door. Each year 55,000 full-time Mormon missionaries fan out around the world (with more than 1 million missionaries having served since the Church’s founding), going on two-year missions to convert people to their philosophy slowly and methodically—a leading reason that a religion that is less than 200 years

old has more than 14.4 million adherents worldwide. For these missionaries—typically young adults supported by family and friends or by their own childhood savings—this rite of passage is often life-changing. It deepens their own commitment to their beliefs while also spreading the ideas of this religion and drawing new members to the Mormon faith.²¹

Compare this to modern environmental canvassers who also go door-to-door asking for campaign donations. They are typically told by their managers to get a donation and move to the next door as quickly as possible, forgoing true engagement with the people they meet. Rather than growing supporters and political power, most of today's environmental door-knockers are merely neighborhood money-miners.²²

Other missionary religious philosophies, such as Buddhism and Islam, also use a variety of social service provisions to spread their philosophies. Islamic madrassas are a leading provider of education in many countries. Today, madrassas educate millions of students around the world, providing literary, math, and science education in addition to knowledge of the Koran and Islam.²³

As the provision of basic services led to new members being integrated into these various communities, social modeling played an important role in shaping their behaviors, and the routine professing of values and myths helped reinforce a new way of living. As numbers grew, so did their political, economic, and cultural influence—both at the aggregate and through the spread of smaller sects of broader philosophical persuasions. Quakers, Jesuits, Jehovah's Witnesses, Shriners (with their network of children's hospitals), and Scientologists have effectively spread their orienting philosophies—no matter how controversial they might have been—through the concerted proliferation of social services, designed in ways that help people in their moment of need and, as important, fold them into a broader philosophical community. Unfortunately, there have been few equivalent efforts by the environmental community.

The Rise of a Missionary Eco-Philosophy?

An informal survey of Kibera, one of the largest slums in Africa, found that nearly half of the roughly 250 schools serving the 200,000–250,000 Kenyans living there are religious in nature. The goal of these Pentecostal, Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, YMCA, Salvation Army, Quaker, and other religious schools is to charitably provide the basic service of education—a service the Kenyan government cannot provide enough of. But these schools are also there to save souls and to add members to their philosophical communities.²⁴

At the same time, there appear to be no schools in Kibera teaching an ecological philosophy. But imagine if there were. Imagine a school that, at every turn reinforced the idea that humanity depends completely and utterly on Earth and its complex systems for our well-being. That it is unjust to consume more than your fair share and to have a lifestyle that depends on the exploitation of ecosystems, workers, and communities polluted by factories, mines, and dumps. That the best life to live is one committed to

changing this untenable, inhumane, and unsustainable system in ways that improve the well-being of your local community, your broader philosophical community, and above all the planetary community.²⁵

This is a philosophy that could be reinforced in every aspect of the school—from what is taught in the classroom (ecology, ethics, activism, and permaculture along with basic math and literacy) to what is served in the lunchroom and everything in between. Some students would walk away just with knowledge, including a better understanding of our dependence on Earth and perhaps a basic livelihood and trade skills—skills that will only grow in value in a post-consumer future. But others would walk away with a deep commitment to this way of thinking, and perhaps even become missionaries of that ecological philosophy, starting new schools or other social services that could improve people's lives while spreading a way of life that could compete with the seductive consumerist philosophy so dominant today.²⁶

And this model could be applied to a variety of needs. Eco-clinics could provide basic medicine but also focus on prevention that will help both people and the planet. For example, people with adult-onset diabetes might be asked to spend time tending the eco-clinic garden in partial payment for treatment, growing healthy food to replace the toxic, processed fare that contributed to their diabetes and so many other modern ailments. The clinic could also provide cooking and lifestyle courses as well as engaging with the larger community to help patients eat well and regain their health. In the process, their ecological impact would shrink along with their waistlines as they reduced their consumption of meat and processed food, both of which have higher ecological impacts than locally grown vegetables.²⁷

Of course, religious social service providers are embedded in a broader community with a somewhat unified belief system—something environmentalists currently lack. But as ecosystems decline further, as the consumerist philosophy is revealed as no longer workable, the philosophies with alternative visions that also offer help and community solidarity will flourish—whether they are ancient religions, new religions, or perhaps even philosophies like environmentalism.

Ideally, social services should not be provided piecemeal by civil society organizations of any type. They should be the responsibility of a functioning government. But in reality, even at the peak of our unsustainable levels of wealth today, many governments fail in their duty to provide basic services for their citizens. As ecosystems unravel, as economies falter, and as local and national governments go bankrupt or adopt austerity measures to appease lenders, there is a good chance that social services will be cut. In that case, the need for nongovernmental actors to provide these services will only increase.

Just like advocacy campaigns, these efforts cost money, of course. Some of the funding could come from foundations perhaps. But groups could also use strategies more typical of religious organizations, generating money directly from adherent communities. Of the \$298 billion donated to charity in 2011 in the United States, 32 percent went to religious groups, while just 2.6 percent was given to environmental groups. People are more likely to give to their own communities—those who are there for them through thick and thin—as well as to those who share deeply in their beliefs and understanding of the world.²⁸

Funding could also come from social enterprises. Just as the Salvation Army earns hundreds of millions of dollars a year from the sale of used household goods and clothing (while also providing a valuable service), the environmental movement could take a more active role in setting up profitable social enterprises that generate revenue for its social service provision arm, as well as for efforts focused on advocacy and shifting broader cultural norms.²⁹

These social-service providers and social enterprises—from cafes, bookstores, and used item stores to renewable energy utilities, energy retrofit providers, and permaculture training programs—would not only generate revenue but also offer a key mechanism to spread the eco-philosophy and recruit new members.

As eco-philosophies spread, and their followers grow in number, new opportunities would grow too. The Quakers, a small Christian sect, became a dominant economic and political force of Pennsylvania in the 1700s as well as a major force in the abolition movement. Even today Quakers remain a powerful voice in international peace and governance processes—far beyond what their total membership of 340,000 would seem to warrant. Eco-philosophical adherents could also play an outsized role in driving cultural change, particularly working to shift the consumer culture to be more sustainable by taking leadership roles in government, the media, business, and education. (See Chapter 10.)³⁰

As the need for resistance to the modern industrial socioeconomic model grows (see Chapter 28), a committed community of environmentalists could be a powerful force, helping to use these tactics—whether as a distinct philosophical group or embedded in other philosophical traditions. (See Box 27–2.)³¹

Getting from Vision to Reality

The odds are that the state of the world is going to get really bad—and much sooner than we think. Reports about the fallout from climate change alone make it clear that the twenty-first century is unlikely to follow a linear path of more growth, more progress, more “development.” There are probably going to be major political, social, and economic disruptions, a flood of fail-

Box 27–2. The Relationship Between Ecological and Religious Philosophies

Are ecological and religious philosophies incompatible? Not at all. Effective missionary philosophies can live beside other philosophies or incorporate those traditions into their practices: witness the syncretic relationship between Shintoism and Buddhism in Japan and the way Christianity incorporated folk religions as it spread.

An ecological philosophy may grow up alongside the dominant religious philosophies of today or even be absorbed by religious reformers, which could prevent the latter from losing their followers as ecological philosophies grow in attractiveness.

Indeed, the greening of religious traditions has already started at the margins, with more Christian sects drawing attention to green teachings from the Bible and designing programs to appeal to environmentally minded adherents. Buddhist monks are establishing sacred forests, Muslims are developing ways to celebrate Ramadan sustainably, and Hindus are finding ways to make ritual sacrifices greener.

In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist movement Sarvodaya Shramadana has created a comprehensive path to both material and spiritual development—emphasizing community, basic economic security, and sustainability at the heart of their model. The movement, which literally means “awakening through sharing,” has focused on small community projects—building latrines, schools, and cultural centers—that improve village well-being and has simultaneously discouraged adoption of consumerism (or in Buddhist terms, attachment and desire). Today this sustainable Buddhist movement has a presence in more than half of Sri Lanka’s 24,000 villages.

As these ideas incubate in coming centuries and the world undergoes dramatic changes, ecological philosophies may form independently and stay independent, they may be absorbed by today’s dominant philosophies (or come into conflict with those philosophies as they compete for members), or they may even absorb or replace older philosophies.

Source: See endnote 31.

ing states, the dislocation of millions of people. Will people in environmental organizations simply close their doors as things unravel, as their funding dries up, and turn instead to simply surviving—taking any job still available in order to feed their families? Who will serve as a voice for Earth? Who will help steer us through this historically unique global ecological transition? Will it be fundamentalist religious institutions that read the unraveling ecosystems as signs of the end times? Or authoritarian governments that offer security in exchange for the last remnants of freedom?³²

The future increasingly looks like it could take a page from a dystopian science fiction novel. Perhaps from *A Canticle for Leibowitz*—the story of a post-collapse civilization where one occupation is harvesting iron rebar out of concrete rubble, with the workers musing on how their ancestors got iron bars into stone in the first place. Over the course of the novel, modern knowledge is rediscovered, and once again people invent electricity, engines, even nuclear power. And how does it end? With humanity once again pursuing growth and empire, and once again destroying itself in the process.³³

The hope is that we prevent collapse by following a new set of philosophical, ethical, and cultural norms that bring about a life-sustaining civilization, or what eco-philosopher Joanna Macy has called “the Great

Turning.” The second hope is that, failing this—and failing to prevent “the Great Unraveling”—we preserve enough knowledge and wisdom so that as the dust settles in a few centuries, with the population stabilized at a lower number that a changed planetary system can sustain, our great-great-great-great grandchildren do not reinvent our mistakes. That they do not once again start worshipping growth and consumption but instead stay true to a philosophy that allows them to sustain the planet that sustains them. As Macy notes, “The awesome thing about the moment that you and I share is that we don’t know which is going to win out, how the story is going to end. That almost seems orchestrated to bring forth from us the biggest moral strength, courage, and creativity. When things are this unstable, a person’s determination—how they choose to invest their energy and heart-mind—can have much more effect on the larger picture than we are accustomed to think.”³⁴

Let us hope that this proves to be the case. And that centuries from now an ecocentric civilization—celebrating its nurturing niche on a once-again flourishing planet—tells stories of the bold individuals and communities that changed humanity’s path in such a glorious way.



Tree seedlings being distributed in Uganda as part of The Alliance of Religions and Conservation’s long-term environmental action plan for sub-Saharan Africa.

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