



Faith in nature

The major religions of the world have an increasingly important role to play in conservation, says Radio 4 producer **Mary Colwell**.

The gorgeous yellow-eared parrot of the Colombian Andes had been reduced to just 81 birds by 1999. Nesting only in slow-growing wax palms high in the cloud forest made the species highly vulnerable to logging and the spread of agriculture, while the local Catholic community used the trees' fronds on Palm Sunday in processions and church decorations. Things looked bleak.

But then conservationists began collaborating with priests. A combination of education and religious insight brought about a change in religious practice and a greater involvement in the local community. There are now more than 1,000 yellow-eared parrots and the number is rising each year. It is one of the greatest success stories in parrot conservation.

Thousands of kilometres away another bird is also benefiting from religious involvement. In Jerusalem in early March,

rabbis hold welcoming ceremonies for Eurasian swifts returning from tropical Africa to nest in the crevices of the Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall). Working alongside the International Center for the Study of Bird Migration, they make sure that the maintenance of the ancient wall takes the swifts into account.

SACRED SAFEGUARDS

This meeting of religion and conservation is having great success around the world – and that's true of all faiths. For example, in the Middle East BirdLife International and local Muslim communities are drawing upon the Islamic concept of *hima*, or a sacred area, to safeguard a variety of sites that are rich in biodiversity but lie outside formally protected lands.

Bannerghatta National Park in southern India is threatened by the rapid expansion of the mighty metropolis of Bangalore; people are settling in the buffer zone

designed to keep people and wildlife apart, and Asian elephants often damage crops. So the Christian conservation organisation A Rocha has set up a grass-roots project in Bannerghatta to explore ways in which the elephants and farmers can co-exist.

By evoking meaningful concepts that reach deep into faith traditions, conservationists have been able to galvanise people in very different ways. In Tibet, for instance, Buddhist monks work with the Snow Leopard Trust to monitor and protect this Endangered high-altitude cat. The snow leopard has long been persecuted by local pastoralists because of livestock predation – as described in the February issue of *BBC Wildlife* – but the monks encourage farmers to see the cats as sacred and deserving of the Buddhist precept of compassion.

These, and many other examples, highlight the importance of seeing species and their habitats not only as the focus of conservation programmes but also as key components of

the spiritual lives of billions of people. In the generally more secular, scientific West this can be an uncomfortable marriage; for example in Western Europe faith is considered a personal matter, so is rarely brought into the public arena. That is not true, however, for most of the rest of the world – and this contrast is growing ever more marked.

FAITH IN THE FUTURE

Last year the Pew Research Center predicted that by 2050 just 13 per cent of the global population – mainly people in Europe – will describe themselves as unaffiliated to a religion or atheist, compared with 16 per cent in 2010. The report states: "With the exception of Buddhists [who have a low birth rate and ageing population], all of the world's major religious groups are poised for at least some growth in absolute numbers in the coming decades." It's an increasingly religious world, and religion is known to be a strong driver of attitudes towards nature. ▶



Given this inescapable fact, it's instructive to look at the distribution of faiths around the globe. Christianity is widespread, with strongholds in South America, the Philippines, sub-Saharan Africa and North America – some of the planet's most biodiverse areas. The Amazon rainforest, for example, sits entirely within strongly Catholic countries, while the population of the Philippines is almost exclusively Catholic. Christianity dominates the rainforests of the Congo, too.

The Muslim world is less widespread, yet the vast majority of the wildlife-rich rainforests of South-East Asia are in Muslim countries. Because overall numbers of Muslims are predicted to increase by 73 per cent over the next 30 years, Islamic beliefs about nature will become more prevalent over a greater area.

So it is undeniable that religion is going to play an increasingly significant part in humanity's attitude to the natural world. And as the yellow-eared parrot, Eurasian swift, Asian elephant and snow leopard show, this has the potential to bring enormous benefits.

BENEFITS OF BELIEVERS

Primary forest surrounds a small Ethiopian Orthodox church in South Gondar, in the north of the country. It's a lush patch of bright green amid a desert of overgrazed land, and is an oasis for insects and birds. Without the church, it would almost certainly have been grazed to nothing.

And there are many similar churches. This is why Meg Lowman of the California Academy of Sciences is working with local faith leaders to help the 3,500 Coptic churches conserve their sacred forests, which are under intense pressure.

Ethiopia's population has tripled since 1970, dramatically escalating demand for firewood and building materials – over

IT'S AN INCREASINGLY RELIGIOUS WORLD, AND RELIGION IS KNOWN TO BE A STRONG DRIVER OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS NATURE.

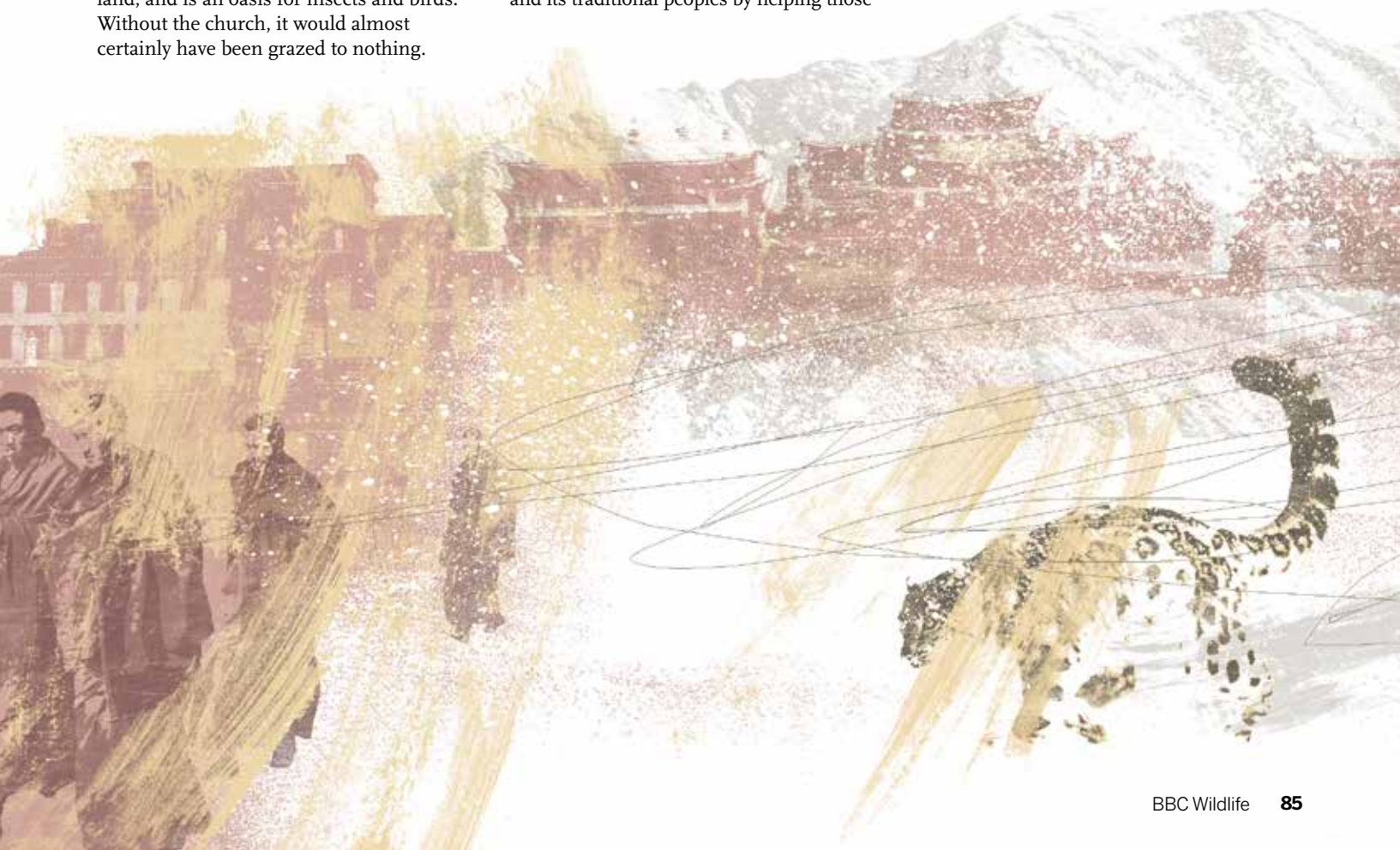
the past 40 years the country has suffered such severe deforestation that just 3 per cent of its tree cover remains. The forests are now "critical conservation areas for a large proportion of Ethiopia's remaining biodiversity", says Lowman, who believes that the work of the Coptic Priests keeps the remaining trees standing.

The Latin American church network REPAM works on an even larger scale. It brings together Christian institutions in nine countries that have contact with the Amazon rainforest. Its aim is to protect the forest and its traditional peoples by helping those

involved in conflict resolution and wrangling over land rights, while raising conservation awareness. Supported by the Vatican, this collaboration is a new step forward for protecting the Amazon.

The Catholic Church is potentially a huge force in wildlife conservation. It has more than one billion members and its influence is even wider – it has a single figurehead who is a global superstar with the ear of many world leaders, as well as a unified structure with an efficient system for disseminating information. Consider the impact of Pope Francis's environmental encyclical *Laudato Si*, published in the run-up to the COP21 climate conference in Paris last December. Widely praised, it is both powerful and moving.

Laudato Si gives Catholics the mandate to act for species conservation: "Greater investment needs to be made in research aimed at understanding more fully the functioning of ecosystems and adequately analysing the different variables associated with any significant modification of the environment. Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another. Each area is responsible for the care of this family. This will require undertaking ▶



WILDLIFE ESSAY

a careful inventory of the species which it hosts, with a view to developing programmes and strategies of protection with particular care for safeguarding species heading towards extinction.”

If the Catholic world, in co-operation with scientists and conservation groups, acted on this statement then the global outlook for biodiversity would surely be very different.

Collaboration between religions and conservation is already producing results, inspiring others to follow. In Bali, one of the threats to the olive ridley turtle was the use of its flesh in Hindu ceremonies that – ironically – venerate the turtle as the sustainer of life (in Hindu mythology, a giant turtle supports the Earth on its back). Local priests worked with the World Wildlife Fund to change the practice by re-interpreting holy texts to show that real meat wasn't necessary, and that drawings or rice cakes could be used as a substitute. Indeed turtle meat is now banned from most religious ceremonies.

But Bali's Hindu priests went further. Today they are actively encouraging the wider population to conserve turtles on local beaches. Conservation NGOs often find this kind of outreach to local communities very difficult to achieve alone, but here the impetus for action is based not on data but on a faith's appeal to the soul.

HEARTS AND MINDS

Conservation is not just about presenting the science and a plan full of neat bullet points: it needs to win the hearts and minds of communities. By understanding what is central to people's lives and appealing to the stories they tell and the narratives that have most meaning, saving species and landscapes can become part of daily life.

Take Misali Island, off the coast of Tanzania. It's an area exceptionally rich in corals that was officially protected by the Tanzanian government in 1998 – but the locals, who are Muslim, simply continued to overfish and dynamite the reef. In the end, the solution was contained in a religious story that built on older, indigenous beliefs that the island and surrounding sea were home to ancestral spirits.

Misali gets its name from the Swahili word *msala*, which means 'prayer mat'. Tradition has it that the Muslim prophet Hadhara appeared to the island's fishermen and asked for a mat to pray on. When none could be found he declared that the island, which faces toward Mecca, would serve as his mat – and thus become holy. By revisiting these important stories, CARE International, an NGO, and Misali's fishermen worked together to bring an end to the dynamiting of reefs.

Indigenous beliefs can be indispensable

to conservation. Sacred habitats – from forest groves to rivers, mountains, lakes, springs and caves – are found all over the world. These holy places, specific to local traditions, provide a network of habitats and their species that join up around the globe.

Faiths interpret the world through story,

COLLABORATION BETWEEN RELIGIONS AND CONSERVATION IS ALREADY PRODUCING RESULTS, INSPIRING OTHERS TO FOLLOW.

poetry and art, requiring an imaginative approach to the Earth that works at the level of the heart. Humanity has communicated great truths in this way long before science. Faiths also use ideas that tend to be missing from purely scientific approaches, such as joy, kindness, self-sacrifice, simplicity, hope, obedience, awe and wonder – all of which are universally felt and understood.

Religions bind their faithful across racial and political divides, and often their unelected leaders are released from short-termism to focus on long-term goals. And,

crucially, hope is built into the system.

Despite initial wariness on both sides, religious groups and conservationists are showing more and more convergence. Some conservation projects may be small and local in focus, but others are pan-national with hugely ambitious aims. Though many will find the combination of religion and conservation difficult to accept, only co-operation and mutual respect between all communities can reverse the terrifying prospect of mass extinction and widespread environmental destruction, which at the moment look ever more likely. Faith in nature has the potential to change the face of the Earth. 🌍

MARY COLWELL gave a version of this essay at 2015's Nature Matters event: www.networksfornature.org.uk. She is a writer and producer: www.marycolwell.blogspot.co.uk

FIND OUT MORE

Shared Planet discussed religion and nature in 2013: <http://bbc.in/231eVdV>

