

## Caring for Creation Through Community-Based Conservation Efforts By Thomas D. Rowley, Executive Director of A Rocha USA

In nearly every community big or small, urban or rural, red state or blue, Christians can be found serving as Jesus' hands and feet in everything from addiction counseling, education and feeding to healthcare, housing and senior care. Loving our neighbors in these myriad ways has improved the lives of millions and at the same time brought the gospel to many who would never have set foot in a church. What if it weren't so?

What if the Christian presence was taken out of your community? Obviously, the churches would be gone, along with worship services and Sunday school classes. But so too, would be several schools. Habitat for Humanity would be missing. As might the food pantry and homeless shelter, the clinic and hospital, the pregnancy center and adoption service. What about the counseling center? Or hospice? Not to mention day care and senior care programs? Yes, taking the Christian presence out of a community would leave huge holes, not just in the so-called "safety net" that cares for those in need, but also in the very life and wellbeing of the community—the relationships fostered and the blessings to both those who are served as well as those who serve. And of course, there would be no Gospel witness—in word or deed.

Sadly, just such a hole exists in most communities today—a hole left by Christians failing to fully embrace the biblical mandate to care for God's creation.

The reasons for this hole are many. Political divisions, economic tradeoffs and differences over the cause and severity of challenges and the choice of solutions make environmental stewardship controversial for many people—particularly it seems for Christians. Bad theology that twists God's command to steward the Earth into a license to exploit and despoil it only complicates matters. And, of course, there is greed: we want what we want when we want it. None of which relieves us of our responsibility to care for the planet on which we live. As the Bible, Old Testament and New, makes crystal clear: we are to lovingly steward ALL that God created—human and nonhuman alike.

But we have not.

People are starving, forests are dwindling and species are going extinct, because we have ignored and at times distorted the call to steward the earth. On top of that, an unbelieving world is watching to see what, if anything, Christians will do to care for the planet and the people we claim God created. We have often failed to live out what we say we believe. The ecological crisis, then, is actually a church crisis. And the size, wealth and global influence of the American church give it the unique ability to lead a response to this crisis.

### An Awakening

Fortunately, if belatedly, Christians across the USA are awakening to the need and biblical call to care for God's wondrous yet beleaguered creation. Though some controversies remain and a few naysayers continue to, well, say "nay," many believers are going green—or at least green-ish. We're recycling and putting up clotheslines. We're taking shorter showers, eating locally grown and organic food and putting fewer miles on the car and more on the bicycle (or for the really crunchy, the Birkenstocks). We're even sipping our fellowship-hall coffee out of ceramic mugs instead of Styrofoam cups. All to the good and all to God's glory. But is that enough? Is there something more or something different we as God's appointed stewards ought to be doing?

For some, the answers to those questions may well be “yes” and “no”. “Yes, that’s enough. And no, I don’t need to do something more or different.”

For others, those answers just don’t feel right. If you’re one of those others, keep reading. This essay is written to help you take your care of creation out of the house and out of the church and into the streets, fields and streams in your community to seek its peace and prosperity, to be an agent of shalom to all God’s creatures.

### **A Rocha: Christians in Conservation**

While there is much work to be done individually to lessen our consumption and collectively to call for legislative and regulatory changes, some of the most effective creation care happens as we learn about, repair and protect the environment around us--of which we are a part and on which we depend. In so doing, we can begin to glorify God and promote shalom forest by forest, stream by stream, community by community. A few examples from the international Christian conservation organization A Rocha may help illustrate. Started in Portugal in 1983 by Anglican minister Peter Harris and his wife Miranda, A Rocha (“the rock” in Portuguese) now has projects in 19 countries. Notably, it is the only Christian organization in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature—an umbrella organization with 1000+ member organizations.

#### Kenya—Promoting Conservation, Education and Economic Development

Like parents everywhere, those living on the edges of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest on Kenya’s coast want a better life for their kids. And they realize education is key. While primary school in Kenya is subsidized, secondary school is not. And with tuition costs at nearly \$300 per student per year, few families can afford it.

Sadly, one of the only ways to raise money for tuition is by plundering the forest and its waters through illegal timbering, poaching and over fishing. The resulting damage to flora and fauna is great even if the monetary returns are not. Much of the timber cut is the native Muhuhu tree used in woodcarvings for tourists and for export to Europe and the United States. Not surprisingly, however, most of the profits end up in the pockets of outsiders and middlemen, not in those of the local people who need the money so desperately. As a result, 90 percent of the children qualified to attend secondary school do not. They simply don’t have the money.

To help both the people and the environment, A Rocha Kenya launched in 2001 the Arabuko-Sokoke Schools and Eco-tourism Scheme--ASSETS for short—a comprehensive conservation, education and economic development effort.

The concept is simple: replace incentives for local people to damage the forest with incentives to protect it. How? By building viewing platforms and a 270-meter suspended walkway into the forest and training guides to show eco-tourists the forest’s incredible and endangered wildlife. (Arabuko-Sokoke is home to six globally threatened bird species and is one of the most species-rich yet most endangered regions in the world). The eco-tourism revenues fund school scholarships for local kids—provided their families agree to refrain from environmentally destructive practices. Now education is paid for not by cutting trees, but by preserving them. In 2010, ASSETS provided scholarships to 205 students.

The program also teaches environmental stewardship and awareness of the connection between the economic health of the people and the health of the forest. Finally, ASSETS provides each of its

scholarship recipients with seedlings to establish their own sustainable woodlots for use as fuel and for wood to sell.

According to A Rocha Kenya Director Colin Jackson, “As Christians, we have a responsibility to look after God’s creation. And as human beings, we are part of the environment. We can’t conserve ecosystems, habitats and species without including people and working alongside with them. It’s a crucial thing to work with the communities.”

### UK—Bridging Cultural and Religious Divides

On the streets of Southall a visitor could be forgiven for thinking he or she was in Karachi, Kathmandu or New Delhi rather than West London. The sights, smells and sounds of the community are distinctly South Asian—the origin of some 85 percent of residents. As a result, it is far easier to find curry in local restaurants than fish and chips. Which isn’t to say that the community is homogenous. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims lead the list of religious affiliation. Christians come in at number four with some 16 percent of the population. And more than 40 languages are spoken in local schools. Here, in this multi-faceted community, A Rocha UK is building bridges in many directions.

The team does that by focusing on something all people in the community—regardless their beliefs, native tongue or culinary preferences—have in common: the environment in which they live and upon which they depend, even if unknowingly. With that common concern as a foundation, A Rocha led the charge in restoring a 90-acre dumping ground with open trash heaps, abandoned cars and polluted streams into a beautiful country park where the team leads nature walks, teaches classes and conducts its research—and invites all comers to participate.

Ironically, the bridges are built not as one might suspect—by setting aside A Rocha’s Christian convictions in order to make “all religions equal, avoid disagreement and therefore accomplish the work.” Rather, the A Rocha UK team is straightforward about what they believe and the impacts of that belief on the work. The notion that Jesus is Lord of all creation is not simply an add-on to the efforts; it is the rationale.

As a result, both the environment and the people of Southall are being healed. The dumping ground turned park illustrates the former. A young mother named Cheryl exemplifies the latter.

A single mother of four, Cheryl had lived in some of the poorest, most crowded parts of London all her life. Having dabbled in the occult, she was terrified of Christians—even of entering a church. When her children began attending A Rocha’s after-school environment club, Cheryl herself grew interested in the wonders of nature and began joining them for events at the community garden, floating classroom and community center. Gradually, her defenses melted. She opened up to team members about her struggles, asked for prayers and was astonished when they were answered. She even began to attend church with her children and grew into a personal faith. Her life and those of her children were transformed.

### USA—Helping the Church Return to Biblical Truth

In *Kingfisher’s Fire: A Story of Hope for God’s Earth*, A Rocha Founder Peter Harris writes of the “widespread confusion between the American way of life and the core of the Christian faith.” Not surprisingly, that confusion--coupled with the politicization of environmental protection, a mistrust of science and some bad theology noted above—has led many US Christians, particularly

evangelicals, to question and, in some cases, resist the call to care for creation. According to Harris, that has made the USA the most challenging country in which to start and sustain A Rocha's efforts.

Despite the difficulties, A Rocha is taking root and growing in the USA. Due to the country's size, large numbers of Christians and the global influence of the American church, A Rocha's strategy here varies from that in other countries. Overseas, A Rocha has tended to start with a single location and project and grow from there, if and as demand and capacity dictate. Here, the need and strategy is to facilitate an entire creation care movement through hands-on projects and educational programs in communities across the nation—as quickly as possible, while maintaining the relational aspect that is so important to the work. Think of it as Habitat for Humanity, but focused on environmental stewardship rather than housing. A winsome, welcoming effort to work with any and all people, churches, schools, nonprofits, and government agencies in the community planting gardens, adopting local streams and lakes, protecting forests and more—whatever the local context demands and local participants desire.

And the network of community-based efforts is growing.

**Lynden, Washington**—In this agricultural community north of Seattle, A Rocha is working to care for creation on three fronts. The efforts started with helping local berry growers protect their crops from European Starlings that annually devour nearly half the berries. To do that, a small team of volunteers began restoring the population of American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*)--small raptors that feed on and frighten away Starlings. Next, the team began planting and tending community gardens in partnership with local churches, a health center and even a mobile home park, and also established a Farmer's Market. Then, with a major foundation grant, A Rocha hired a full-time director and started educating and engaging churches, farms, schools and families in repairing and protecting the area's damaged salmon streams.

Dave Timmer, the director, is a conservation biologist, long-time resident of Lynden and member of the Christian Reformed Church (the community's main denomination), and has both the expertise to oversee the work and the trust of those needed for effective collaboration. According to him, the conservatism of the community made it difficult for outside environmental organizations to make inroads. Because Dave has experience and a good reputation in both worlds, however, he has been able to help overcome the mistrust. On top of that, the hands-on approach of A Rocha eschews talking, which tends to divide, in favor of rolling up sleeves and working side by side on local concerns. And that not only narrows the divide, it fosters community.

According to Timmer, the gardens have been instrumental in reaching out to the church community and are a concrete example of positive things the church can do. In addition, they feed the poor, which the church understands as part of its mission. From that starting point, the team has been able to build trust and begin to help people engage in environmental stewardship.

**Texas Hill Country**--Deep in the heart of Texas, sits the Edwards Plateau—a region so rich in species and so threatened by development and other pressures that Harvard Biologist E.O. Wilson called it the world's 26<sup>th</sup> "biodiversity hotspot". Worldwide, these hotspots comprise less than three percent of Earth's land area, yet are home to more than 50 percent of the world's plant species and 42 percent of all terrestrial vertebrate species. Sadly, they have also lost at least 70 percent of their original vegetation.

Here, A Rocha has launched a major effort in collaboration with a foster care facility and charter school that sits on 7,000 acres. Sharing the property with these neglected, abused and abandoned children are a springs complex that form one-half of the headwaters of the Frio River and two

endangered bird species, the Black-capped vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*) and Golden-cheeked warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*). In a very real sense, then, the ranch is a place where some of God's precious creatures—human and nonhuman alike—find refuge. It is also a place where A Rocha is helping ensure that refuge by working to repair over-grazed, out-of-balance lands and teach the children and visitors alike about the marvels of nature.

The project has just begun, but the team has already cleared a few hundred acres of Ashe juniper (*Juniperus ashei*). Known locally as mountain cedar, this native has run amok from decades of overgrazing and fire suppression, crowding out other species and lowering the water table with its insatiable thirst. With help from the Nature Conservancy, the team has arranged for the U.S. Geological Survey to install equipment to monitor levels in the Edwards aquifer below and streamflow in the pristine-but-fragile Frio River--a critical piece of research in this semi-arid country. Underway also are plans for holistic livestock management to help revive native grasses as cattle are managed to mimic the long-gone bison herds that once roamed the region. Also in development are curriculum and activities to involve the ranch's children and students, as well as others of all ages in the region. Finally, A Rocha is recruiting faculty and students from nearby universities for help with research projects to measure the effectiveness of the current efforts and develop guidelines for future efforts.

### Encouraging a Movement: Ideas for Starting Community-Based Projects

The above examples, while different in context and approach, illustrate what a Christian approach to environmental stewardship might look like and what it might accomplish. Because contexts do vary, however, no detailed blueprint or template for developing a community-based project exists or is likely possible. That said, the following principles gathered from A Rocha's long international experience might be helpful to those wanting to implement creation care projects of their own.

**1. Develop guiding principles.** In A Rocha, these principles are referred to as the five core commitments:

- Christian: Underlying all we do is our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.
- Conservation: We carry out research, conduct projects and run education programs for the conservation and restoration of nature and the well being of people.
- Community: We work in local communities where we live, work and worship.
- Cross-cultural: We draw on the insights and skills of people from diverse cultures, both locally and around the world.
- Cooperation: We work in partnership with a wide variety of organizations and individuals who share our concerns.

**2. Understand what the effort is and what it is not.** While it is not necessary to be a theologian to care for God's creation, the "why" is as important as the "how." Both distinguish God-centered approaches from secular ones. Thus, a few basic concepts are essential. For those wishing to delve deeper into the theology of creation care, see the References section.

- It is worship. Caring for the Earth is a right and worshipful response to God in recognition that all things have been created through Jesus and for him, that in him all things hold together, and that through his death on the cross all things are redeemed. It is worship of God the Creator, not his creation.
- It is relationship. Caring for God’s creation is a way of lovingly relating to God, to our selves, to our neighbors and to all of nature. It is a way of living.
- While it serves other purposes, it is right to do regardless. Stewarding the Earth is directly connected to other biblical commands—caring for the poor, loving our neighbors and sharing the Gospel. But it is not strictly utilitarian. God values his creation simply because he made it. We should do no less.
- It requires both passion and grace. As with any other aspect of Kingdom living, caring for creation is by turns gratifying and frustrating. There are blessings and there are challenges. None of us is perfect. We all have blind spots. We must not become pharisaical. And we must not let our passion for creation or for our projects outrun our grace for people—those we work with, those we seek to influence, and even those who seem to stand in our way.
- It is a “get to”, not just a “have to”. If we are open to them, the blessings that come from relating rightly to God, self, neighbors and all of creation far outweigh the sacrifices and inconveniences involved. With gratitude and obedience comes joy.
- This is not a program. Showing God’s love to all creation—human and non-human alike—is not a series of tasks or boxes to check. It cannot be summed up, nor packaged. It can only be lived—as worship, in relationship, with both passion and grace, because we get to.

**3. Bathe it in prayer.** With these understandings, the next step is to pray. The ACTS model may be helpful—Adoration, Confession (for our lack of stewardship), Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Resist the temptation to go straight to supplication. It is good to ask for vision and wisdom, opportunities and partners, volunteers and funding, but it is better to ask in the context of praise, confession and thanksgiving.

**4. Build community.** It may only take one person to begin an effort, but it will take many to sustain it. Therefore, it is critical to build a strong team of people who will work together to create and pursue the vision of local creation care—leaders, workers, volunteers, partners, funders, and more.

There are at least two paths to building this team, this community. You can adopt the “if we build it, they will come” strategy—starting a project, then hoping others will buy in. This approach can succeed when and where an obvious need exists around which people can be recruited. Alternatively, you can take a “community first” rather “project first” approach. Build the relationships, the community. Then, as a community, pray, investigate, vision, plan and implement. This approach often minimizes the potential for early missteps and maximizes the potential for

buy-in, commitment, resources and more. Either way can work. With prayer and wise counsel, discern which is better in your context.

One last word on this: Coming in from the outside to start and lead an effort rarely works. Having history, knowledge and connections in the community are extremely helpful, if not absolutely essential.

**5. Ask and listen.** Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22) We all need wise counsel. Local pastors, school officials, business people, government officials, representatives from environmental organizations and more make helpful advisors. Asking them what they think about caring for the Earth, what they see as local needs, whether and how they might like to get involved, can go a long way toward charting a course for action and generating buy-in for it.

**6. Develop a plan.** The basic process for agreeing on a plan of action is relatively straightforward. Gather the group. Pray. Ensure that everyone has the same or at least compatible expectations of the planning exercise. Consider the results of the interviews. Discuss. Agree on a few SMART goals—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely. Take stock of resources available to pursue those goals. Devise steps/tasks to achieve the goals. Assign responsibility for those steps/tasks. Agree deadlines. Write it all down. But realize that the plan, no matter how good it is, is not set in stone and will need to be evaluated and revised over time.

This straightforward process can be added to, modified and refined using the many resources freely available on the Internet to help with the planning process.

A word about measuring: while many of the results of such an effort are hard if not impossible to quantify, others are not. Keeping track of accomplishments—from numbers of volunteers involved to tons of food grown to the dollar value of in-kind donations received—is incredibly helpful in sustaining the efforts. For one thing, it shows all involved that you are making progress. For another, it shows those not involved that the effort is worth joining. Finally, pictures and videos are a highly effective way of telling the story. Therefore, it is important to record as much of the work as possible once it begins.

**7. Sustain the Effort:** Starting the effort is one thing. Sustaining it is another. Both take work. But sustaining it takes more. To help lessen the work or at least make it more enjoyable, remember the *Why* and *How* from Step 1.

Why are you doing the work? What's the point? If your answer is to save the forest or the stream, or to change people's minds about caring for the creation, you may well be disappointed. What happens if/when you don't achieve the goals? Will you be demoralized? Will you be able to keep going? A better and more biblical rationale for the work is simply this: joyful obedience. We care for God's creation because God tells us to and because there is joy in obeying God's Word--joy that doesn't depend on the results of our efforts. After all, God is in charge of the results.

The second concept relates to how you do the work. If your approach is to grit your teeth and plow ahead, solo if necessary, knocking down all obstacles (and people) that stand in your way, you'll soon find yourself bruised, lonely and likely burned out. Again, the more biblical, more effective and more joyful approach is to do the work graciously in relationship with others. Which, of course, is easier when you remember that you are not in charge of the results; God is.

Remembering and implementing these two key concepts will help you and the rest of the group avoid burnout; attract friends, volunteers, partners and funders; and in so doing sustain the effort.

**8. Rest, give thanks and celebrate.** As with anything about which one is passionate, it is easy to get busy, too busy. Again, biblical principles offer the antidote: rest, thanksgiving and celebration.

**9. Revisit and revise:** Things change. Issues and opportunities arise. Original goals may be achieved and new ones may be identified. Sustaining the effort requires being flexible. None of which is to say that the overall Vision and Mission should be replaced easily or carelessly. Only that course corrections are sometimes necessary.

### **A Few Examples**

As noted above, each community's context is different and it is critical to take that into account in the process outlined above. Nevertheless, a few examples of the work being done in other communities may help prime the pump.

- **Gardens.** Community gardens are springing up across the country. Churches, schools, neighborhood associations and groups of all kinds are converting lawns, flood plains, vacant lots and even rooftops to provide fresh, produce—often for those in need. And the benefits of gardening go beyond the produce grown. Done properly, community gardens serve to build community. As neighbors work alongside neighbor, relationships develop, friendships bloom and community grows. Likewise, they serve to help heal the creation by providing much-needed food sources for our beleaguered pollinators, reduce overwatering and chemicals and lessen the damage done by transporting our food thousands of miles. They also offer wonderful educational opportunities for children and adults alike. Gardens are a very non-threatening, non-controversial way for people and churches to engage in creation care.
- **Watersheds.** Simply put, a watershed is an area of land that drains into a body of water—a creek, stream, river, lake or ocean. Every community is part of a watershed. Every thing happens in a watershed. They help define our place. And they tell us how we are doing at protecting the part of the planet where we live. Sadly, few of us know what watershed we live in, if we even understand the concept. Fortunately, that is changing. Many groups and churches have adopted their watersheds and are taking steps to protect them. First and foremost in those efforts is education—showing people what it means to live in that particular watershed, what the challenges are in protecting it and steps to improve its health. Those steps can include reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers; reducing irrigation; planting vegetative buffer strips along banks and shores to filter and reduce pollution; marking storm drains to prevent dumping; and more. The opportunities are endless, as are the potential partners.
- **Invasives.** Each year, invasive plants, animals and insects cause billions of dollars of damage in the USA alone. They outcompete native species. They ruin habitats and destroy water bodies. They even bring diseases that can affect humans. Controlling them is a huge task, one too big to be left solely to “professionals.” Seeing this great and growing need, many groups are working—with help and direction from those professionals—to kill and remove invasives and reduce the havoc they wreak.



- **Monitoring.** Critical to any conservation endeavor is scientific monitoring. Without it, we do not know exactly what the need is, how best to meet it or whether we have made any progress. Again, this is an area that need not be left just to professional scientists. So-called “citizen scientists” are incredibly helpful in protecting the planet by helping to monitor all sorts of things—from water quality to bird counts to the days on which buds burst in spring. All that is needed is a bit of advice and training, some basic tools and the commitment to go out and observe.
- **Education.** No aspect of caring for God’s good creation is more important than education. We protect that which we love. We love that which we know. Biblical and scientific learning about the creation and how to protect it are absolutely critical. And community groups can play a huge role—from Vacation Bible Schools to watershed workshops and beyond. And the best environmental educational efforts are built on the backs of actual conservation work. There is nothing like engaging the hands to inspire the heart and equip the head and vice versa.

### Final Thoughts

Long absent in the fight to steward the environment, the American church is now awakening. And the potential benefits of biblically and scientifically based conservation efforts extend well beyond the communities where those efforts occur and even beyond the nation’s borders. According to Harris, whose wide travels have shown him both cause and effect of the world’s environmental crises, the American church—as an exporter of both theology and consumeristic tendencies—can either be a major force for good or for ill around the world. Through community-based conservation efforts, US Christians can help create a force for good.

**For more information** and resources on community-based conservation efforts, please see [www.arocha-usa.org](http://www.arocha-usa.org)