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## Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet

Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet was a programme developed by WWF and ARC to create a term of recognition for significant new projects launched by the world's faiths at a major meeting in Kathmandu in 2000.

Every religion believes that the gift of life itself is sacred: we do not own it, but we have responsibility to care for it. It was this shared understanding that led WWF and ARC to create a special term of praise and recognition for major significant new projects launched by the World's religions at a meeting in Kathmandu in 2000

The Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet programme highlights both the theology and the practice of caring for the environment which every single major religion now advocates and undertakes. The first 26 gifts were recognised internationally in November 2000 and a further 14 in November 2002. The Sacred Gifts address a wide range of issues from climate change to marine conservation, from sustainable forest management to environmental advocacy.

'Sacred Gifts are catalysts for action. They are conservation templates for religious followers around the world.'

*Dr Claude Martin, Director-General of WWF International*

## Mongolian Buddhists reintroduce traditional hunting and logging bans

The first Sacred Gift from the Buddhists of Mongolia was the reintroduction in 2000 of a centuries-old ban on hunting the snow leopard and the saiga antelope, both of which are endangered. The ban is an expression of the ancient Buddhist teaching of compassion towards all life, which in practice encourages Buddhists to engage in sustainable natural resource management.

In 2001, this Sacred Gift was expanded to include the recreation of traditional Buddhist Sacred Reserves. From the 12th century onwards Buddhists have declared certain sacred areas as protected by the deities in order to preserve the fragile ecology of Mongolia. Under Communism these were destroyed.

With the help of ARC, WWF and the World Bank, seven such reserves have been resacralised and dedicated. The Buddhists have also published a major [study of the sacred sutra texts](#) that outlines the sacred dimension of virtually every valley, plain and mountain of Mongolia. Both these actions are expected to create strong moral

and religious support for the protection of wildlife and for existing governmental protection and enforcement measures.

Among the sacred sites on which hunting is now banned is the Bogd Khan Mountain, Mongolia's oldest Buddhist protected area. It dates back to the 12th century, and is the site where hunting bans were first introduced 800 years ago. In June 2003, in response to concerns about the protection of the forested area facing the capital city Ulaanbaator, the Buddhist community unveiled a new carving of the protector deity of that side of the mountain, in a move which is intended to strengthen the conservation of the forest.

Another region that comes under the full protection of this ban is the Khan Kentii Strictly Protected Area. It encompasses 1.2 million hectares of land and is home to one tenth of Mongolia's forests and many rare and threatened species of plants and animals.

### **Gandan Tegchenling Monastery**

Known as the centre of Mongolian Buddhism, Gandan Tegchenling Monastery in Ulaanbaatar led the move to reintroduce the hunting ban. It is the largest and most important monastery in Mongolia today, with more than 850 monks. Its name signifies Great Place of Complete Joy.

Gandan Monastery, along with Erdene Zuu, has been a pioneer of conscious Buddhist environmentalism in Mongolia. It has been a central monastery in the work that ARC, WWF and the World Bank have undertaken, and a key example for other monasteries wanting to participate in environmental work.

As Ven. Da Lama Bayambajav, who acts as a liaison between Gandan Monastery and environmental NGOs elaborates: "Gandan Monastery's focus is on the teaching of Buddhism.

"However environmental protection is an integral part of Buddhist training both here and in other monasteries. Monks are taught not to cut trees, not to pollute water and to love the area because of karma. Most Mongolian monks discuss these issues.

"Over the past 70 years, communism destroyed the foundations of Buddhism. Now people are trying to re-establish temples. The main focus at Gandan Monastery has therefore been on the construction of temples and on preparing human souls.

"We are now establishing new targets in the environmental and social areas; these areas will be developed more in the future. Every temple should have a room, or at least a desk, for conservation training and planning.

"Monks should go and teach conservation to those who are living in polluted lands, and to those who are living in untouched and unpolluted lands. Buddhist talks are more powerful than rulings from the state."

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*This article originally appeared on the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website, [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org). ARC closed in 2019.*

