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JAPAN: Shintos commit to sustainable management of sacred forests

In 2007 Jinja Honcho, the Association of Shinto shrines in Japan, agreed to work with other faiths to develop a set of Religious Management Standards for religious-owned forests.

The initiative follows on from a pledge made in 2000, under the aegis of the Sacred Gifts programme organised by ARC and WWF, when Japan's Shinto leaders pledged not only to manage all of their sacred forests in sustainable ways but also only to buy timber from sustainably managed forests on behalf of their 80,000 or more shrines.

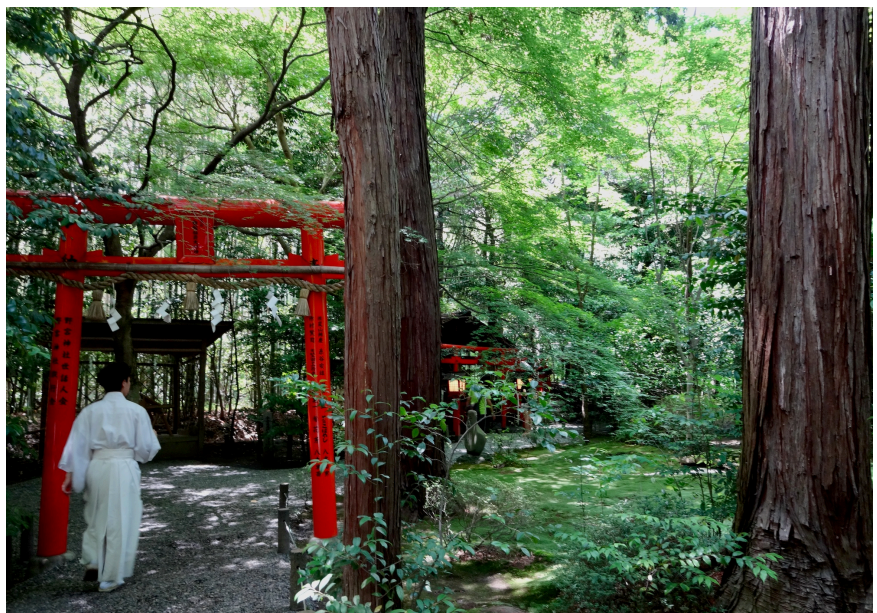
As a [Sacred Gift](#), this original initiative was important both to Japan and to the endangered forests of SE Asia.

The Gift reflected the Shinto culture's reverence for nature, and particularly for trees and woodlands. Thousands of Shinto shrines in Japan are built largely of wood and these shrines form the heart of the villages and local communities of Japan. Often the only extensive areas where trees and greenery flourish in Japanese cities and towns are in holy shrines. Here the faith controls the land and is able to practice what it teaches about the sacred nature of all life.

According to custom, the Shinto shrines at Ise are ritually rebuilt every 20 to 25 years – with the wood coming either from local forests or bought from outside. As part of this Gift, the Association of Shinto Shrines, Jinja Honcho, has now requested that the wood for shrines conforms to sustainable forestry standards.

Since most of this wood comes from countries outside Japan, this increase in consumer demand is likely to have a significant effect on Japanese companies buying wood from abroad.

- Read more about Ise Jingu, the Grand Shrine of Ise, in [Three Sacred Shinto Forests](#).



About the Sacred Gifts programme

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.

Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet 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.

One of the more extraordinary outcomes of the WWF/ARC Kathmandu [Sacred Gifts programme](#) in 2000 was the creation of a unique partnership between the Jinja Honcho Association of Shinto Shrines of Japan and the Church of Sweden. While the Shinto [made a pledge](#) to reassess their use of forestry resources as a Sacred Gift, both traditions also made a joint declaration suggesting that all faith-owned forests should be run on ecologically sustainable and socially just lines and they requested ARC to work to achieve this.

Such a revolutionary new partnership, especially unusual for the [Shinto](#), led to much discussion and debate and in 2005 this partnership really began to take off with joint meetings and discussions held, at the invitation of the Shinto.

In 2005, a joint team from WWF, ARC, the Church of Sweden and FSC, funded by WWF-UK, undertook a study tour of some of the major Shinto-owned forests in order to better understand the Shinto perspective on both sacred sites and forests. Read more about that trip in [Shinto Forestry](#).

Subsequent discussions led to a plan to achieve an International Religious Forestry Standard to which all participating religions would have signed up that could be launched as a worldwide development in 2014. The Church of Sweden proposed that they host the first event of this process and that meeting took place in Visby in August 2007.

The attendees

The gathering brought together owners and managers of religious forests, from [Buddhism](#), Christianity (Catholics – the [Benedictine](#) movement; Lutherans; Maronites and Orthodox); the [Druze](#) tradition; Hinduism and Judaism. The basic aim of the gathering was to ensure that all such forests, forest lands, watersheds and habitats could be managed to the highest religious, social and ecological standards.



Shinto ceremony during the Faith and Forests meeting at Visby, Sweden

We were joined by secular partners specialising in forestry issues from The Christensen Fund, Conservation International, FSC, IUCN, UNDP and WWF Sweden. Swedish Government representatives also joined us at various stages.

Inspired by, yet different from FSC

While inspired by the example of [the Forestry Stewardship Council, FSC](#), it was also recognised that FSC was designed to counter a rapacious commercial market and not for traditions who have often owned the forests and who have had a sacred relationship with the land for centuries. We needed to create a Standard that would reflect the very different circumstances and nature of such forests but which would also help the faiths to creatively manage them to the highest environmental and social standards.

In 2005, an ARC-WWF report, *Beyond Belief*, found sacred groves are some of the oldest forms of forest protection in the world, with high levels of biodiversity, yet the powerful role of faith beliefs and practices in maintaining forests is often overlooked by both secular and faith groups alike.

The Religious Forestry Standard: the next Six Years

ARC agreed to draw up a six-year timetable and set of milestones to be discussed with all the participating faiths and to be guided by the steering group of the three founding organisations, namely Jinja Honcho, The Church of Sweden and ARC. This document is currently being prepared. We are very grateful to The Pilkington Foundation and WWF UK for supporting the funding of this event along with the Church of Sweden.

"The protection and proper management of the vast quantities of religiously owned forests – along with their associated watersheds and animal habitats - is a visible signs of the growing role of faiths in protecting the environment in line with their own teachings," said ARC's secretary general Martin Palmer. "It is also one of the most specific ways of helping tackle climate change and CO2 emissions."

During the Faiths and Forests meeting the Church of Sweden declared that the endangered meadows of Gotland, of which the Church owns the majority, would now be classified as Church of Sweden Protected Environments.

** In an unprecedented move, the [Church of Sweden](#) agreed in 2000 to move towards certifying 15 per cent of its forests – more than 100,000 hectares – as sustainably managed under the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) guidelines.

** Hindu groups and the Orissa government have agreed, under the Sacred Gifts programme, to [re-establish the state's sacred forests](#) to provide sustainably-managed wood for the annual festival of Lord Jagannath.

This article originally appeared on the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website, www.arcworld.org. ARC closed in 2019.
