



Society for Conservation Biology

RELIGION AND CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

Working Group

<http://www.conbio.org/workinggroups/Religion/>

Daoism and Conservation Fact Sheet

Religion and background

Daoist philosophy is based on the writings of Laozi (Lao Tzu), who wrote the Dao De Jing, and Zhuangzi (Chuang tzu). Under the East Han dynasty, about 2,000 years ago, Daoism was formalized as a religion. However, many ideas in Daoism can be traced back at least 10,000 years to Shamanism in Mongolia and China. Daoist ideas and practices are also prominent in Chinese folk religion, which combines aspects of Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and ancestor worship. The various branches of Daoism generally share a core of beliefs, including compassion, moderation, humility, wu wei (effortless action), naturalness, health and longevity, and aligning oneself bodily and spiritually with the Dao (the way, or the indefinable flow of the universe that gave rise to and sustains the cosmic order).

Religion in relation to environment

In Daoism, nature is not viewed as something separate from or outside of the human arena. Rather, as explained by James Miller, Assistant Professor of Chinese Religions at Queen's University, "The goal of all higher Daoist practice is to mirror unobtrusively the dynamic spontaneity of one's environment, to become imperceptible and transparent as though one were not at all" (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/daoism/index.html>). Because of its emphasis on harmony with the natural order of the universe, Daoism lends itself easily to an environmental ethic.

Additionally, Daoism emphasizes harmony between the two opposing forces, Yin and Yang, that struggle within everything. The need for harmony highlights the importance of mankind acting carefully so as not to disrupt the harmony of nature.

"...anyone who has read key Daoist masters such as Lao Zi and Chuang Tsu knows to what extent this faith tradition emphasizes environmental stewardship as a sacred duty, something we simply must do in order to preserve our future and the balance of the entire world. Take climate change. The whole problem and challenge can be beautifully captured and explained through the concepts of Yin and Yang: The carbon balance between earth and sky is off kilter. This causes instability and disasters. It is truly significant that the current masters of Daoism in China have started to communicate precisely through this ancient yet new vocabulary." - Olav Kjørven, Assistant Secretary General and Director of Development Policy at the UN Development Program (<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=276>)

Statements from the China Daoist Association, the leading body representing all Daoists in mainland China (available at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website):

"...let everything grow according to its own course without any interference. This is called the way of no action, no selfishness (wu-wei), and this principle is an important rule for Daoists. It teaches them to be very plain and modest, and not to struggle with others for personal gain in their material life."

"In the Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching), the basic classic of Daoism, there is this verse: 'Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural.' This means that the whole of humanity should attach great importance to the Earth and should obey its rule of movement. The Earth has to respect the changes of Heaven, and Heaven must abide by the Dao. And the Dao follows the natural course of development of everything. So we can see that what human beings can do with nature is to help everything grow according to its own way. We should cultivate in people's minds the way of no action in relation to nature, and let nature be itself."



"If anything runs counter to the harmony and balance of nature, even if it is of great immediate interest and profit, people should restrain themselves from doing it, so as to prevent nature's punishment. Furthermore, insatiable human desire will lead to the overexploitation of natural resources. So people should remember that to be too successful is to be on the path to defeat."

Examples of conservation projects aided by religion

- In 2006, Daoist monks and nuns from ten temples signed the Qinling Declaration, a commitment to protect the environment surrounding their sacred lands. (<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=138>)
- Following the Third Daoist Ecology Conference in 2008, an Eight Year Plan was developed, spanning from 2010 through 2017, which sets forth procedures and plans for protecting China's environment. (<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=277>)
- At Taibai mountain in Central China, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation helped local monks rebuild a destroyed pilgrimage temple as a Daoist Ecology Temple. Here they teach environmental workshops, such as the one that led to the Qinling Declaration, above. (<http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=266>)
- Daoists participate in the United Religions Initiative, which promotes interfaith cooperation for the healing of all living beings on Earth. <http://www.uri.org/>

For more information, see Alliance of Religions and Conservation (www.arcworld.org) and the Forum on Religion and Ecology (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/main.html>)

