



# Society for Conservation Biology

## RELIGION AND CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

### Working Group

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

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## Confucianism and Conservation Fact Sheet

### Background

Confucianism is a moral and philosophical system rooted in the teachings of K'ung-fu-tzu (Confucius, 551–479 B.C.E.). It emphasizes values such as right conduct, ethical responsibilities in family and societal relationships, education and cultivation of both the individual and society, and sociopolitical order and propriety. Confucianism is not inherently theistic but has often been melded with other religious traditions, and the Neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi (1130-1200 C.E.) added metaphysical aspects to Confucianism. Confucianism has had a profound role in shaping centuries of East Asian social and political thought and continues to influence culture throughout East Asia.

### Religion in relation to environment

In contrast to western traditions, which emphasize human interactions with the divine, Confucian thought centers around a triad of interacting forces: heaven (a guiding force not associated with deity), earth, and humans. Confucian texts highlight the creative, life-generating and transformational nature of the universe and urge humans to harmonize their actions with cosmic processes. The ethical system arising from this holistic world view emphasizes the common good and communal responsibility rather than individual rights, encouraging self-restraint, personal integrity, compassion, and *jen* or humaneness. These values are crucial in forming an environmental ethic. Additionally, the Confucian emphasis on loyalty, both intergenerational and hierarchical, can easily be extended to the natural world itself and can foster the creation of a sustainable society.

Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529 C.E.), in *Inquiry on the Great Learning*, teaches that the *jen* of a great man extends to all people, to all animals, to all other living things, and even to stones. If any of these is threatened or suffering, he feels empathy and compassion for them.

*"Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. . . ."* -Chang Tsai (1020-1077 C.E.), *Western Inscription*

*"Heaven, earth, and humans are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and humans bring them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and humans complete them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with."* -Tung Ch'ung-shu (c. 179–c.104 B.C.E.)

### Examples of religious leaders in conservation

- Tu Weiming, Harvard-Yenching Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies, is a leading scholar who is reinterpreting Confucian thought in relation to the environment and other issues.
- Confucians 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](http://www.arcworld.org)) and the Forum on Religion and Ecology (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/main.html>)

