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## Respect for Life: a Spiritual Basis for Environmentalism

By Janet Aird

Environmentalism grows from varied roots in the wide range of human belief and practice. For many, it is a blend of influences.

Mati Waiya, for instance, connects two cultures – traditional and modern -- to help protect nature. Spiritual leader of the Chumash Indians, he leads the Wishtoyo Foundation in its role of “preserving the wisdom of the ancient Chumash culture and linking it to present day environmental issues.”

Chumash culture developed a deep regard for nature because these California Native Americans depended directly on the natural world for their food, clothing and shelter. Their behavior is not religious, Waiya emphasizes, but spiritual, a way of life based on respect for all living things. In protecting the environment, we need to use our hearts as well as science.

The Wishtoyo Foundation is involved in many environmental projects. Waiya visits schools and teaches children about nature with songs, dances and stories. He is coast keeper of the Ventura/Oxnard waterways, and works with environmental organizations such as Santa Monica Baykeeper to restore marine habitats. He addressed a Sierra Club meeting in Los Angeles in September.

In his devotion to nature, he expresses a spiritual feeling shared by many faiths and communities.

In Southern Africa, leaders of the Sekai Trust believe that people must view wildlife, wild places and themselves as “part of a natural and life-affirming whole.” Its mandate is to protect Africa’s wildlife and wilderness by encouraging respect and reverence for all its creatures, and it encourages governments to incorporate traditional African environmentalism into public policies.

The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, sounds a powerful call for conservation of nature for the welfare of mankind. “Peace and the survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human

activities that lack a commitment to humanitarian values,” he writes in “Humanity and Ecology.” “Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the Earth’s living things. We must teach people that conservation directly aids our survival. Ultimately, the decision to save the environment must come from the human heart. The key point is a call for a genuine sense of universal responsibility that is based on love, compassion and clear awareness.”

Some religious organizations in the United States have joined in pursuit of environmental goals. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment includes groups such as the Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Agencies, United Jewish Appeal and Catholic Charities USA. Members work within their own religious communities and with outside groups such as labor unions, corporations, scientific associations and environmental groups.

The Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation is another interfaith organization whose beliefs have led to political action. Its members believe that because the world’s forests are created by God, all people of faith are responsible for caring for them. It has called for prayer and a search for wisdom by churches and synagogues on the spiritual value of forests, and the end to cutting of old-growth forests and to commercial logging on public land.

Perhaps a spiritual appreciation of nature can help make up for the remoteness of many modern Americans from the soil and trees that sustain them. “We forgot how to appreciate the resources our future is dependent on,” Chumash spiritual leader Waiya says. “We have to stop being so greedy in our ways with nature.”

*For more information on Wishtoyo Foundation, see [www.wishtoyo.org](http://www.wishtoyo.org); on Religious Partnership, see: [www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org); on Religious Campaign, see: [www.creationethics.org](http://www.creationethics.org).*