

# Leaning on religion to help the environment

'Eco-guide' urges people to make green living a part of their faith

By DAVID EE

BUDDHISM teaches non-violence and living simply, both Islam and Christianity state that humans are stewards of the earth, and Hinduism says nature is a gift from God.

So why not rally the religious here to do more to protect the environment?

This thinking is behind the first faith-based "eco-guide" to be launched here next month.

The free 62-page guide is written by academic and environmentalist Sofiah Jamil, 31, a Muslim who sits on the board of the Young Association of Muslim Professionals (Young AMP), and community development trainer Farheen Mukri, 42, also a Muslim.

The Singaporeans hope that champions within each faith will use it to help followers and places of worship "turn their beliefs into action", and make green living "part and parcel" of their faith.

The guide includes a simple checklist covering 10 areas for faith groups to rate their performance.

These include energy and water use, purchasing decisions, transport and surrounding flora and fauna.

For instance, places of worship are asked if they recycle their rubbish, publicise conservation issues or organise nature walks.

Groups are encouraged to introduce ways to improve these, so that their practices are "not seen merely in terms of being a ritual".

The guide also draws on information from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation in Britain, a secular group that helps faiths build environmental programmes, to neatly outline overlapping views on nature from Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Baha'i, Judaism, Sikhism and Taoism.

"Most religions highlight how nature is part of God's creation, and how we're here on earth to protect what God has created for us," said Ms Sofiah. "But in terms of action there's very little."

Understanding how the environment fits into their faiths will give people "impetus to act", she hopes.

The latest population census done in 2010 found that 84 per cent of Singapore residents ascribed to a religion.

Religious leaders welcomed the guide. General secretary of the National Council of Churches of Singapore Lim K. Tham

said that the guide shows readers that "environmental issues are not just the concern of any one religious group".

He recommended that churches encourage their members to study the guide in small groups or by themselves.

Venerable Seck Kwang Phing, the secretary-general of the Singapore Buddhist Federation, said that he would encourage preachers to speak more about the environment.

Buddhists should "be mindful at all times" not to harm the environment, he added.

In fact, the religious may be more easily persuaded to aspire towards sustainable living if they see that deeds to protect the environment are deemed pious, said Young AMP president Shamir Rahim.

He cited the Islamic act of ablution or washing oneself that is often done with a running tap.

"You can actually take ablution with half a cup of water," he said.

The guide will be launched on Feb 8 at The Hub Singapore on Somerset Road, and can already be downloaded for free from <http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/faith-nature-guide/>

President of the Nature Society Shawn Lum, who is not deeply religious, said: "No matter what your religious views are, these are shared values. We're all for the same thing."

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## How religions view nature

HOW religions view the environment and nature (from Faith and Nature Eco-Guide to Greening Faith Communities)

**Buddhism:** Teaches non-violence, living simply, and respect for life and the natural world

**Christianity:** Teaches that nature is God's loving creation, so believers should be its stewards

**Islam:** Teaches that believers are not masters of the earth; rather, God has entrusted the earth to them for safekeeping

**Hinduism:** Teaches believers a reverence for life, an awareness of the great forces of nature, and a desire to live in harmony with it

**Sikhism:** Teaches that the earth and universe are sacred, and the earth's barrenness reflects emptiness within humans

**Taoism:** Teaches that humans should try not to do anything counter to the balance of nature